

WILD WEST



WEEKLY

A MAGAZINE CONTAINING STORIES, SKETCHES Etc. OF WESTERN LIFE.

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NEW YORK, JUNE 21, 1907.

Price 5 Cents.

YOUNG WILD WEST AT GREASER GULCH; OR, ARIETTA AND THE MASKED MEXICANS.

By AN OLD SCOUT.



The scream had scarcely left the lips of Arietta when Wild appeared on the scene. At that very instant the masked Mexicans let the cougars out of the cave. Crack! crack! crack! Wild started in coolly to clean them up.

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YOUNG WILD WEST AT GREASER GULCH

OR,

Arietta and the Masked Mexicans

BY AN OLD SCOUT.

CHAPTER I.

THE ARRIVAL AT GREASER GULCH.

One fine morning in the month of March, a few years ago, when the West and Southwest were in more of an extreme wild condition than they now are, a very cosy little camp might have been seen located in the Sierra del Ojo Mountains, in the southern part of Arizona, quite near the boundary line of Old Mexico.

The sun was just showing above the distant peaks to the east and as it fell upon the foliage that adorned the mountain side the different tints of green were brought out so distinctly that no one could well imagine how it was possible that such a variety of shades between the dark hue of the cedar and the light tinge of the willows that hung over the turbulent stream that dashed down the rocks to be lost in the dry sands below, could exist.

The trees and shrubbery of that semi-tropical country are in such a variety that many of them are unnamed.

It certainly was a beautiful scene, but the inmates of the camp referred to did not seem to be much impressed by it, probably because such scenery had become rather monotonous to them.

Too much of a thing wears away the charm, so to speak, and what would appear very beautiful to one others would fail to notice.

The party camped in this wild and out-of-the-way spot numbered eight, two of them being Chinamen.

One of these had just kindled a fire to cook the breakfast and the other was busy cutting off some steaks from a bunch of venison.

The leader of the party was a boy, who, with his long

light chestnut hair hanging over his shoulders and with his well-knit frame encased in a fancy suit of buckskin, made a perfect picture of the true Western hero, and when we state that he was no other than Young Wild West, the Champion Deadshot and Prince of the Saddle, the reader can rest assured that such he was.

Though but a boy in years, Young Wild West was every inch a man in every other sense.

Having been born and reared in the West, he had grown up a true representative of it.

He was called the Champion Deadshot of the West because he had defeated all the crack shots who had disputed the title, and they were not a few, either.

Because he could ride with masterful ease and grace, and could tame the wildest kind of a horse, the nickname of the Prince of the Saddle had been given him by his friends.

Cool, daring unto recklessness and ever ready to stand up for the right, the dashing boy had won for himself a name that few men had ever attained, but he took it all very modestly, for he was not fond of praise.

Young Wild West, being well supplied with money from the income he derived from the mines he owned and was interested in, chose to lead an out-door life, and it was his hobby to go about the wild parts of the West in search of adventure, for it was excitement that he liked.

His two partners, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart, always went with him, for they had come to be just like him in many respects.

Cheyenne Charlie was a tall, straight, muscular man of something like thirty, and had spent several years of his life as a scout for the government.

He was rather dark of complexion, wore his hair long

and sported a drooping mustache. Though experienced himself, he gave way to the dashing boy he chose to call his leader.

Jim Dart was a boy about the same age as our hero. Ever since he had been acquainted with Wild, as he called him, he had been a chum of the young deadshot, and he could not have loved him more if he had been his brother.

During the past year Anna, the wife of Cheyenne Charlie, and two young and beautiful girls named Arietta Murdock and Eloise Gardner, had accompanied Young Wild West and his two partners on their adventurous trips.

Arietta was the charming, golden-haired sweetheart of the dashing young deadshot and Eloise had promised to marry Jim Dart some day, when they both became old enough.

The two Chinamen were employed by Young Wild West as cook and all-around man, and their names were Hop Wah and Wing Wah, and were brothers.

Wing, the cook, was just a plain, every-day Celestial, honest and always ready to do his task, but inclined to doze and sleep when he had nothing to do.

His brother Hop was not like him in many respects, for he was one of the most clever sleight-of-hand performers that ever appeared before an audience, and, being a natural born humorist, he could entertain in the most pleasing way.

Besides these accomplishments, Hop was a professional card-sharp.

He had learned this since he had been in America, having been thrown almost continually in contact with the inhabitants of the different mining camps, where gambling is one of the leading features.

Of course he had learned to drink whisky. That was only natural for one of his sort.

He could lie occasionally, too, and he did it in such a way as to make it more comical than wicked.

But as the most of our readers are very well acquainted with our characters by this time, there is no need of giving any further description of them.

"Hurry along the breakfast a little, Wing," said Young Wild West to the cook. "I must say that I am a little more hungry than usual. We had supper rather early last night, and the longer I wait, after smelling the odor of boiling coffee and broiling venison, the more I feel like getting at it."

"Allee light, Misler Wild. Me hully allee sancee putty quickee," was the retort.

"Oh, I know you are doing your best. But I can't help saying something. How about the rest of you—are you hungry?"

The dashing young deadshot cast a glance at his partner and the girls as he spoke.

There was an affirmative reply from all hands.

Then Hop Wah came up from the brook, and with a smile that was child-like and bland, he remarked:

"Me vally muchee hungrily, too, so be."

"I reckon you're always hungry, you heathen galoot,"

spoke up Cheyenne Charlie, who always made it a point to give it to the Chinaman good and strong every time he got the chance.

This was probably because Hop had made the scout the victim of his clever jokes on several occasions.

The Celestial only smiled the more, and, shaking his head, remarked:

"Misler Charlie gittee so muchee hungrily lat him allee sancee feel in um bad humor, so be."

The rest smiled at this sally, and the scout thought it best to drop it.

The girls were assisting at preparing the meal, and in a few minutes it was ready.

The sun was now pretty well up, and it gave evidence that another very warm day was in store for them.

Young Wild West and his friends soon sat down and ate a hearty breakfast.

And as soon as they were through they got ready to move.

They had come to the wild region in the Sierra del Ojo Mountains in search of a mining camp, where gold was said to be found in great quantities, but which was so far out of the way from a city or town that it was difficult to get the rich ore to a market.

Young Wild West figured on establishing a mule-team system to and from the place, and thus develop the mines that were there.

This was, of course, providing that the stories he had heard were anything like true.

Greaser Gulch was the name the mining camp went by, and it was said that the most of the inhabitants were Mexicans.

As it was located on American soil, in Arizona, our friends would not be infringing on anyone's rights by going to the place and staking out claims.

Our hero and his partners figured that they ought to reach Greaser Gulch by noon, and that was why they were making such an early start.

It was not long before the tents were struck and the two pack-horses were loaded with the outfit, and then mounting their horses, the party struck out to the south.

Young Wild West, mounted on his splendid sorrel stallion, Spitsfire, led the way, with charming Arietta at his side.

The girl rode a pony that was almost snow white, and she looked like a veritable queen of the saddle as she rode along, her yellow-golden hair streaming in the fresh morning breeze.

Wild's long chestnut hair, but a very few shades darker, contrasted just enough to make a pleasing sight, and Cheyenne Charlie, with his long black hair, riding close behind them, showed up nicely.

It was a very rough trail they were following—too rough for wagons, by far, but their horses were sure-footed, so they experienced little difficulty.

They had not been riding more than half an hour when

game became so plentiful that they felt that it was their duty to stop long enough to bag some of it.

Young Wild West always made it a rule not to kill any more game than they wanted to use, for he did not consider it sport to slay animals or birds just for the sake of doing the shooting.

They got over a dozen fine partridges and then pushed on.

It was about half an hour before noon when they suddenly came in sight of a little settlement of shanties, right at the mouth of a rather wide gulch.

"I guess we are here!" exclaimed our hero, as he came to a halt and surveyed the scene below them.

It surely was what might be called a mining camp, though very few men could be seen at work.

The shanties numbered about twenty, and scattered around near them was half a dozen tents.

"There's plenty of greasers there, I reckon," remarked Cheyenne Charlie, shrugging his shoulders. "There's women folks there, too."

This was so, for women and a few children could be seen going in and out of the shanties.

While our friends had fully a mile to travel before they could get down in the gulch, they were not more than a quarter of that distance from it in a straight line.

The camp lay something like two hundred feet below the level they had halted upon, and as they looked down upon it they could see the semi-tropical wildflowers growing near the banks of the little stream that flowed through the center of the gulch.

Here and there a garden patch could be seen, and this gave the place a home-like appearance.

On the whole Greaser Gulch was a very pretty, not to say picturesque, spot.

The scout's wife made a remark to this effect.

"Oh, it looks all right from here, Anna," said Charlie. "But you'll find it ain't what it seems ter be when we git down there. A greaser is a greaser, an' that's all there is ter it. There may be a few 'Mericans there, but if they've been there very long they've got as lazy as ther Greasers. That's ther way it goes. Why, there ought ter be a population of sixty or seventy men in that camp, but yer can't p'int out more'n a dozen what's workin'. Plenty of gold here, hey? I should reckon so!"

"You haven't got a very good opinion of ther place, Charlie," observed Jim Dart, with a smile. "But just because we can't see very many at work does not signify that there i-n't plenty of gold to be found there. It is near noon, you know, and some men have a way of knocking off work during the heat of the day."

"That's right, Jim." nodded our hero. "Then, again, a Mexican never work any more than is absolutely necessary, anyhow. From what we were told of Greaser Gulch, the best claims in it are occupied by Mexicans. They won't work them much, but are waiting for someone to come along and buy them out. But come on, we may as well get down there and begin to get acquainted. It is pretty

quiet-looking in the camp there, but that don't say that we won't have a lively time of it before we get out of it."

"Yer kin bet your life it don't! A greaser is a greaser, as I said before!" exclaimed the scout.

Just as they were going to proceed on their way down the winding slope they heard the sounds made by approaching horses.

Wild threw up his hand for them to remain at a halt.

The next minnute three horsemen put in appearance.

It was not strange that three, or even more horsemen, should show up, but the fact that they were masked was enough to make it rather startling.

If their style of dress counted for anything, the strangers were Mexicans, for they were attired in the flashy and gorgeous style so common to the higher class of their race.

Our friends thought sure it meant a hold-up, and they were ready for business right away.

But, much to their surprise, the three horsemen put spurs to their steeds and disappeared in the woods they had emerged from as quickly as they had come in sight.

"Great gimlets!" cried Cheyenne Charlie, who had thrown his rifle to his shoulder ready to fire; "I reckon that was somethin', all right!"

"Well, there is something strange about it, I must say," Young Wild West declared. "I thought the three galoots meant to tackle us. But the moment they saw us here they turned and rode away, as though they were afraid of us. We have got to find out something about those fellows before we leave Greaser Gulch, boys! It is quite likely that they belong around here, and that this is not the last we shall see of them."

"One thing about them, they were not common greasers, anyhow," said Jim. "They were what you might call regular Mexican dandies."

"Well, never mind about them; we'll go on down," our hero remarked, as he started forward. "Keep your eyes open, and if they show up again and attempt to interfere with us, they'll get all that is coming to them."

They all rode down the slope now, but saw nothing more of the masked Mexicans, or anyone else, until they reached the gulch.

Straight up the single narrow street that ran almost parallel with the stream they rode and came to a halt in front of the largest of the shanties, which bore a big sign declaring it to be a first-class hotel.

Half a dozen Mexicans and a couple of Americans were lounging in front of the building, and they stared at our friends as they rode up.

A man over six feet tall, and with a very heavy mustache and bald head, came out and bowed politely to them.

It did not take Young Wild West and his friends more than a second to note that he was an American, and that he evidently owned the hotel.

"How about a good, square meal for the party?" Wild asked, as he rested his elbow on the horn of his saddle and looked at the man.

"You've struck jest ther right spot fur that, strangers,"

came the quick reply. "Here, you Mike! Jest take care of these here hosses, an' don't let ther grass grow under your feet, either."

"Never mind about the horses," said Wild, calmly. "We'll see to them. I just got a notion that it would be an agreeable change to eat dinner at a hotel. We are going to camp somewhere around here after we eat."

Before anything further could be said the three Mexicans they had met a short time before rode up and dismounted near them.

CHAPTER II.

WILD STRIKES A PUZZLE.

There was no mistaking the three men, for Young Wild West could have told them by the horses they rode, if by no other way.

In the second or two they had seen them up on the mountain side they had got them stamped upon their memories.

Now that their masks were off it could be seen that the Mexicans were young men and rather prepossessing in appearance.

They looked at our friends as though they had never seen them before, and then leaving their horses standing in front of the place, went inside the shanty hotel.

Wild was just the least bit puzzled over this.

He was almost positive that they were the same three they had met just before they rode down into the mining camp; but they were certainly very good actors, if they were, for they surely took the part of strangers who had never seen our friends before.

That the Mexicans were well known there was evident by the way the loungers acted.

They were paying all their attention to Young Wild West and his friends.

As soon as they had all dismounted the girls were escorted into the hotel sitting-room.

The two Chinamen were left in charge of the horses and then Young Wild West and his partners went into the barroom.

"I reckon you'll have ter wait till nigh one o'clock fur your grub, young feller," said the tall man with the bald head. "My wife wants ter fix up somethin' putty nice on account of ther young ladies, yer know."

"All right," answered our hero. "I guess we will go and find a place to pitch our camp, then. The pack-horses ought to be unloaded, anyhow."

"I reckon yer kin stop on any place what ain't got a saloon on it, so long as yer don't git on some galoot's claim," answered the landlord. "Strike out ter ther left of my hotel fur a couple of hundred yards an' you'll find just about what yer want."

Tenning to the conversation, just as anyone might have done.

Not once did they act as though they had appeared before the boy and his partners but a few minutes before with masks covering their faces.

Wild decided not to bring up the subject just then.

The Mexicans had not even attempted to interfere with him and his friends, even though they had worn masks.

He decided to select a good camping grounds and let the Chinamen put things in order while they were waiting for dinner.

"Come on, boys," he said. "We'll follow the advice of the landlord, I guess, and go where he suggested."

They went on out, and giving the word to Hop and Wing, they were soon moving for a spot further up, along the bank of the stream.

"How about this spot, boys?" our hero asked, as he came to a halt about two hundred yards from the shanty hotel.

"Jest ther place!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie, as he nodded his approval. "We kin put up ther tents right ag'in them rocks, an' that will make a good back fur 'em. This are a rocky sort of a place, anyhow, an' that's jest what we want, 'cause if anything like a fight happens ter take place we'll have good cover."

"It don't look as though there is much danger of our getting into a fight," spoke up Jim Dart. "The men around here seem to be peaceful enough, even if the most of them are greasers."

"Yer can't tell how they'll act later on," the scout retorted. "I don't like them three fancy dressed galoots much. What in thunder was they doin' with masks on their faces when we first met 'em? An' why did they light out so quick when they seen us? That's what I calls a sort of a puzzle."

"You can't call it anything else, I guess," Wild observed. "But never mind. We'll locate here for a while. I guess we can find out all we want to know in two or three days. It strikes me that Greaser Gulch has been greatly exaggerated, as far as its wonderful wealth is concerned."

"Yer kin bet your life it has!" Charlie declared. "I never yet seen a minin' camp what wasn't."

"That's so," nodded Dart.

"Well, Hop, you and Wing can strike right in now. Get a move on you and you will be done by the time your dinner is ready at the hotel. We'll see to it that you get as good as the rest of us does."

"Allee light, Misler Wild," came the reply from both Celestials.

Then he showed them just where he wanted the tents pitched, and after that turned and walked back to the hotel with Charlie and Jim.

"Well, did yer strike a good place?" asked the landlord, pleasantly, as they came back.

"Yes, just the kind of a place we like," answered our hero. "I guess we are not infringing on anybody's rights, either. Anyhow, we are not going to stay here over two

or three days. We just came here to find out what sort of place Greaser Gulch was."

"The place is much better than the name the Americans have given it, senor," spoke up one of the three Mexicans, who were still there.

He spoke in excellent English, showing that he had been educated in an American school.

"Well, queer names are given to mining camps, you know," Wild answered, smiling at him. "I know a Mexican doesn't much like to be called a greaser, but it is a name that has been given to them, and there is no use in kicking against it."

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders.

"There are more of our race here than of yours, so I think the name ought to be changed," he said.

"Well, why don't you change it, then?"

"It might make trouble, and, besides, if we did try to change it, you Americans would still call it Greaser Gulch."

"That's right!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie. "Yer might call it ther Garden of Eden, but ther boys would still say Greaser Gulch. It's a name what jest suits ther place, I reckon, so what's ther use of tryin' ter change it, anyhow?"

"Don't you think a Mexican is as good as an American, providing he behaves like a gentleman should?" asked the man, a little hotly.

"No!" was the quick reply. "A greaser is a greaser, an' that's all there is ter it!"

"Senor, I will not stand that insult!" cried the Mexican, his brow darkening.

"Well, if yer won't stand it yer kin lay down ter it, then. What do yer want ter do about it?"

Charlie was ready for a row right away.

His opinion of greasers in general was not much.

But Wild interfered now.

"I can't see the advisability of having a row over this," he said, coolly. "Suppose you let it drop?"

"I will let nothing drop," retorted the Mexican, as he placed his fingers on the butt of a revolver.

The other two made the same move, and the crowd that had gathered in the place promptly moved aside to escape the bullets they thought were coming.

"Take your hands off your shooters!"

The command rang out sharp and clear, as, with wonderful quickness, Young Wild West whipped out a revolver and waved its muzzle before the three Mexicans.

There was a sudden silence.

The inmates of the room looked at the dashing young deadshot with fear and admiration.

He stood like a statue in the center of the floor, nothing moving but the revolver he held in his hand.

The Mexicans let go their weapons with remarkable alacrity.

"I don't know who you are," observed Wild, calmly, as he looked at them. "But I haven't much use for men who

go riding about with masks on their faces. To speak plainly, I believe you fellows are no good!"

"Senor, you are mistaken in your men," answered the leader of the trio, as he found the use of his tongue. "We don't go riding about with our faces covered by masks. We are gentlemen, all three of us, and we are at the Gulch for the purpose of making money, no doubt the same as you are. You are mistaken."

"I may be, but I don't think so," retorted our hero, still keeping his revolver swinging back and forth. "Anyhow, it makes little difference. We don't care for all the masked Mexicans there are in Arizona. We have a way of minding our own business, and if there is anyone to blame for this little argument you are the ones. I guess that will be about all."

The boy dropped his shooter back into the holster and stepped up to the bar, just as though it had been merely a little horse-play he had been indulging in.

"Give us something to drink," he said, nodding to the proprietor, who stood looking at him, his face expressing naught but surprise and admiration.

"What will you have, gents?"

"Oh, I want a soft drink myself. The rest can take what they like."

"I ain't got nothin' but whisky," was the landlord's reply.

"Well, let me have a cigar, then. One of the best you have got, too."

"Sartin."

He put out a box and Wild and Jim each took one, for they never drank anything strong.

Charlie took a little "bug-juice," as he called the whisky, and the loiterers promptly stepped up and did likewise.

The three Mexicans turned and walked out of the place, ignoring the boy's invitation.

Wild said nothing at this.

He did not want to have any further trouble with them, for the truth was that he was not a little puzzled about them.

The men who had declared that he was mistaken in saying that they were the ones they had met masked had caused a doubt to come in his mind.

But if they were not the ones they were dressed the same, and the horses looked to be the identical ones.

Still there was a reasonable doubt that they were not the same, for a great many horses look alike, and it was barely a glimpse they had got of them, anyhow.

"I kinder think I know who you are," said the proprietor, smiling as the boy paid him for the round.

"You do, eh? Well, who do you think I am?"

"Young Wild West, ther Champion Deadshot."

"Right you are, my friend."

"I was sartin of it when I seen yer draw your gun so quick," and the man nodded with satisfaction. "I never set eyes on yer afore, but I'd heard tell of yer, an' it struck

me all of a sudden that you was Young Wild West. My name is Meeker, as yer may have noticed by ther sign over ther door."

"Meeker, eh? Well, I am glad to meet you. These two gentlemen are my partners, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart."

"I've heard a little about them, too," and Meeker put out his hand and shook with all three of them.

"I reckon if anyone's welcome ter Greaser Gulch it's you!" he added. "What are yer goin' ter have? I'll set 'em up on ther strength of Young Wild West's comin' to ther camp, boys. Name yer beverage. It all comes out of one barrel, but yer kin have your choice."

They all took it straight, as before, and Wild and Jim accepted cigars again, as did Charlie this time, for he made it a point not to drink more than was good for him, since he had been a married man.

"Now, then," said our hero, "I want to ask you a question, Mr. Meeker."

"What is it? Yer kin bet I'll answer it if I possibly kin."

"Do you know anything about any masked Mexicans riding around these parts?"

Meeker shook his head and put on a grave face.

"I don't know nothin' about 'em, any more than I've heard that there is some of ther galoots what shows up every now an' then with masks on their faces. They ain't never tried ter rob anybody, though, so that makes it a sort of a mystery."

"Well, we met three of them just as we were about to ride down the slope before we came in town. I have strong reasons to believe that the three who just went out of here were the identical ones, too."

"I don't think so. They go around a good deal, watchin' fur miners that want ter sell out cheap. Then they buy up ther land an' hold it without workin' it. They're lookin' ter make a big speck, I reckon."

"How many such fellows as they are in the camp?"

"Them three is ther only ones what dresses in dandy rigs that I know of."

"Well, the three we saw back on the hill had the same sort of costumes, and they had the same horses, I think."

"Well, that looks putty strange," and the landlord looked at our hero keenly. "But I can't think that Mignel an' his pards would ride around with their faces covered with masks. What could be ther object of it?"

"Well, that's what I want to find out. I like to solve mysteries, you know. I'll guarantee that we will know all about it before two days have passed, Mr. Meeker."

"Good! I'll bet if anyone kin find out it will be you."

Just then there was a clatter of hoofs, and, going to the door, our hero saw three more Mexicans riding up. When he saw that they were attired the same as the other three, who were sitting on the porch, he made up his mind that there must be a mistake.

CHAPTER III.

WILD FINDS THAT HE MADE A MISTAKE.

Wild stood in the doorway and watched the horsemen as they dismounted.

He saw that the three seated on the porch were as much interested in them as he was himself.

"They are either mighty good at putting on, or they are total strangers," he commented to himself.

His eyes then turned to the horses of the newcomers, and when he saw that they looked very much like those that belonged to the others he knew that these were the three who had worn the masks.

Though they were attired in a costume similar to the others, they were men of middle age, and nothing alike in features, other than that they had the color and expression of those of their race.

Wild thought it was as good a time as any to try and settle the mystery regarding the masked Mexicans.

"How are you, senors?" he said, smiling at them pleasantly. "How is it that you are not wearing your masks?"

The three strangers looked at him coolly, and one of them promptly retorted:

"Senor, was you addressing us?"

"Yes, that's right. How is it that you have taken off your masks?"

"Masks? Why, we don't have to wear masks, senor. We have done nothing that we should be afraid to show our faces to anyone. Why do you ask such a question?"

"Well, if you don't know why I ask such a question, all right. But there is just this much about it: Either you three showed up before us a little while ago on the hill above the gulch, or it was the three who sit there on the bench. I am inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt since you have showed up. But it don't make any difference. You did not bother us, so I suppose it is really none of our business whether you wear masks or not. I asked the question to satisfy my curiosity, that's all."

"That is a failing you Americans have, senor," was the cool retort. "While I don't know what you are talkin' about, I feel bound to tell you that. If you were not a mere boy, I should feel it my duty to invite you to step out in the road and either apologize or fight me with the weapons I might chose."

"Oh," exclaimed Wild, his face lighting up with pleasure. "Just forget that I am only a boy, will you? Nothing would suit me better than to meet a man who goes to go masked in the woods on an equal footing. Come out in the road, and don't forget to name the weapon that you can best use, too."

Wild lost no time in stepping out into the road that ran through the heart of the little village.

Though the three Mexicans seated on the porch were not much surprised, the others were.

It was evident that the man who had joined the others

George had hardly meant what he said, for he appeared to be very uneasy all of a sudden.

"Come on," exclaimed Wild. "I mean business, whether you do or not!"

"Boy, you talk like a fool!" was the retort, while the Mexican's dark eyes flashed. "I don't want your blood on my hands."

"Don't worry about having my blood on your hands, you ~~masquerading~~ greaser! I'll soon make you understand that you have barked up the wrong tree."

This exasperated the fellow, and, without any further hesitation, he stepped out and confronted the dashing young deadshot.

"What sort of weapons shall it be?" Wild asked, coolly.

"You have a pair of revolvers, I see," was the reply.

"Yes, that's right."

"Get yourself ready to use one of them, then."

"I am ready."

The Mexican placed his hand on his revolver and placed his right foot forward.

Wild remained standing still, facing him, a smile playing about his lips.

But as the man made a move to draw his weapon the boy's hand dropped to his right side as quick as a flash, and when it came up an instant later there was a shooter in it.

The muzzle pointed squarely at the Mexican's heart, too, and the hand that held the revolver was as steady as a rock.

"Why don't you go ahead and shoot? You were the first to touch a shooter, senor."

The face of the Mexican turned pale as death.

His two companions fidgeted about in an uneasy way, but neither of them offered to interfere.

There was a deep silence for the space of two or three seconds.

Then the Mexican let his hands drop to his sides.

"You are too quick for me, senor," he said. "I do not want to fight with you."

"Ah! You are a sensible fellow, I guess," answered Wild, with a laugh. "It is a pleasure for me to pull a shooter the way I did just now. I did not mean to shoot at you unless you tried it on me. And even then, I would have only shot the revolver from your hand. I have done that trick so many times. Mr. Greaser, that it comes natural to me. Just turn around sideways, will you?"

"What for?" was the nervous reply.

"Don't I say!"

There was a peculiar ring of command in the boy's voice, and without waiting another second, the Mexican obeyed.

"That is a very fancy buckle you have on your belt. It is silver, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is silver."

"Well, you stand perfectly quiet now, and I'll show you how I can open it. Stand now!"

As the words left the lips of the young deadshot his revolver came down with a sudden jerk.

Crack!

The buckle flew from the belt in a twinkling and down dropped the belt.

"I just want to show you that I can shoot pretty well, that is all, Mr. Greaser," said Wild. "Now if you are satisfied, I am."

"I am satisfied, senor."

The boy walked back and got upon the porch, where the lookers-on were standing.

"That boy is ther Champion Deadshot of ther West, gents," observed the proprietor of the hotel. "I reckon yer sorter made a mistake when yer run up ag'in him. But I'm mighty glad that yer are takin' it in good part. We ain't had no one ter bury here in nigh a week, an' it ain't ter my likin' ter see any of ther good citizens go under. I lose money when sich a thing happens."

Wild and his partners were surprised to see how well the Mexicans took it all.

The fellow called Miguel seemed to be delighted at the way the duel had turned out.

"Will you shake hands with me, Senor Young Wild West?" he asked, putting out his hand to the boy in a very frank way.

"Certainly I will," was the reply.

They did so.

"Now will you extend the same courtesy to my friends?"

Wild shook hands with the other two, and he was now convinced that they were not the three masked Mexicans they had met on the hill.

But the others were, and he felt quite certain of it.

"Senor," he said, after a pause, "it may be that I owe you and your two friends an apology. I should like to have a few words in private with you, if you please."

"It is a pleasure for me to grant your desire, Senor West," was the polite retort.

Wild stepped into the adjoining room and Miguel followed him.

Looking at him squarely, our hero said:

"Do you know those other three men?"

"I never saw them before in my life, senor," was the reply.

"I believe you. Well, as I said when we first met, we saw three men, mounted on horses that greatly resembled the ones you have. The men wore masks on their faces. It was quite natural that I should take you to be the same three when you rode up."

"Quite natural, senor. But I give you my word of honor that neither myself nor companions ever wore masks, unless it was at a fancy-dress ball."

Wild knew it was right for him to offer an apology, so he promptly did so.

It was seldom that he made a mistake, but this time he had, and he knew it.

Miguel accepted it very graciously and seemed greatly

pleased at getting on friendly terms with the dashing young deadshot.

"Men riding about with masks on their faces are not exactly what they should be, Senor West," he said.

"No. But what makes it appear strange is that their horses so greatly resemble yours. Then, too, they are dressed in the same style as you are. But there is nothing remarkable about that, since it is the dress of your countrymen—of the better class of your countrymen, I should say."

"The dress of the better class of greasers, I suppose?" and the man smiled.

"Well, I suppose that is what one of my partners would say. The word greaser does sound a little ugly, I'll admit, but you can't break a scout or miner from using it."

"I know it. I am trying hard not to notice it. A man can be a gentleman, whether he is a Mexican or an American."

"Certainly, Senor Miguel."

The two now walked out into the barroom.

The three strangers were refreshing themselves at the bar and strictly minding their own business.

Wild decided to let the matter drop, and he had a good cause to do so, for just then they were called to dinner.

He walked in with his partners and found the girls waiting for them.

"Wild," said Arietta, "I was watching what took place out in the road. Which of the men were the ones we met on the hill?"

"The last three, Et," was the reply. "I am quite sure of that now. The first three are gentlemen, I think."

"Well, you made one of them take water all right. I was afraid you might shoot him and hurt him badly."

"Oh, I didn't want to do that. But when he spoke of stepping out and fighting a duel with me, if I wasn't a boy, I made up my mind to show him that I was very much of a man. It is a way I have, and I can't help it, to save me."

Just then Senor Miguel and his two companions came in to dinner.

They were guests at the hotel, so there was nothing strange in this.

There was nothing to do but for Wild to introduce them to the girls, so he did so.

Then the meal passed off very pleasantly.

The Mexicans talked a great deal about what they were doing at the mining camp, and they seemed to think that they were going to make a big pile of money there.

Wild was half inclined to put up at the hotel during their stay there, but he decided that it would be best to carry out the original idea and camp out.

So a little later they all went over to the camp, and finding that Hop and Wing had everything in good shape, our hero sent them over to the hotel to get their dinner, which had been paid for by him.

Hop had been itching to get there ever since he saw the

The fact was that he was anxious to get a drink of tanglefoot.

That was his failing.

He hastened into the barroom the first thing, dragging his brother after him.

Miguel and his two friends were not there, but the three strange Mexicans were.

They had been drinking pretty heavily, and when they saw the two Mongolians they scowled.

It was evident that they had no use for a Chinaman.

Hop smiled at them, pleasantly, as he was wont to do to everybody, and then the fellow Wild had tamed so easily exclaimed:

"Carramba! A Chinee should not drink where there are gentlemen!"

"Whattee mattee?" asked Hop, looking surprised. "Me allee light; me workee for Young Wild West."

That had just the effect he supposed it would.

The Mexican hauled in his horns quickly.

The landlord had been telling them all about Young Wild West, and when they heard that the Chinaman was in his employ they evidently thought that they had better leave him alone.

"Me allee light, so be," repeated the clever Celestial; "so my blother allee light, so be. Me likee havee lillee dlink of tanglefoot, Misler Landlord!"

"Sartin yer kin have it," was the retort. "Your money is as good as anyone else's."

They got what they wanted, and when he had smacked his lips to express his satisfaction, Hop turned to the three Mexicans and said:

"Now me showee velly nicee lillee tick, so be."

All three of them scowled, but when he took his big yellow silk handkerchief from his pocket they showed signs of being slightly interested.

"Now eveybody watchee," said Hop, smiling blandly.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CAVE OF GOLD.

Though the Mexicans hardly wanted to, they did watch the Chinaman closely.

There was just about a dozen men in the place now, and the majority of them were greasers.

But outside of the three strangers no one had shown signs of having any particular dislike for Hop and Wing.

The manner of Hop caused them to smile, instead.

As he drew his big handkerchief and flaunted it in the air the spectators pressed forward, eager to see what he was going to do.

"Me allee samice velly muchee smarte Chinee!" Hop said assuringly. "Me gotfee uncle in China wunner velly muchee smart, and me allee sumee three him. My blother no velly muchee smartee; he allee sumee fool Chinee!"

Wing did not like this, but he took it for granted that it was all in the trick that was about to be performed, so he only grinned.

It so happened that Hop could not be better fixed to play a trick on the Mexicans, for, while he was helping Wing to put the camp in shape, he had run across a half-grown ground-mole.

The mole could not see, of course, but it was very much alive.

The clever Chinaman had placed it in a little box, cutting a couple of small holes in the side, so the creature could not suffocate, and he had it in one of his pockets at that very minute.

But it so happened that he had another box that looked exactly like the one the mole was in.

He now produced this box.

It was only a common pasteboard box, such as bottles of medicine are encased in, and when he opened it and showed all hands that there was absolutely nothing in but the thin air, there was a deep silence.

"You gotee wachee?" Hop asked the nearest of the trio of Mexicans.

"Yes," was the reply.

"Me likee havee lille while; me no hurtee."

"Well, you can't have my watch."

"Allee light. Me havee somebody else's wachee, len."

"You can hava mine, Senor Chinee," spoke up the man next to the one who had refused, speaking with a slight accent. "I taka da chance that you no hurt."

"Me no hurtee," assured the Chinaman as he took the timepiece. "Wachee allee samee alive."

He placed it to his ear and nodded approvingly.

"Go on, Senor Chinee," said the Mexican, smiling, for he was in a pretty good humor now, if his two companions were not.

"Everybody wachee!" exclaimed Hop.

Then he placed the watch in the box and closed the lid.

Next he put the box on the bar, and then he again told them all to watch.

Over the box flaunted the handkerchief, and the Celestial magician proceeded to arrange it to his satisfaction.

At length he stepped back and gave a nod of satisfaction.

"You takee up um handkerchief," he said, looking at the man he had borrowed the watch of.

"Certainly," was the reply, and then he did so.

There was the box, just as Hop had placed it there, to all appearances.

Hop nodded at the man who owned the watch and said:

"You are whatee timee, so be."

"Me looks at da watch?" asked the Mexican.

"You allee macee see whatee timee."

Then the fellow picked up the box and immediately opened it.

He was unwilling moving in it, and, with a yell of fear, he dropped it on the counter.

Out rolled the mole.

Hop drew up his hands and shook his head, sadly.

"Lat too bad!" he exclaimed; "wachee allee samee turnee in um poor lille blind lat! Me velly muchee solly!"

To say that the spectators were amazed would be but putting it mildly.

The only one in the room who did not appear to be surprised was Wing.

He looked on with an air of indifference.

Hop quickly caught the mole and stuffed it back into the box.

"Now me havee makee wachee comee back," he said, putting on the old smile.

The handkerchief was thrown over the box, the usual preliminaries gone through, and then the clever Chinaman looked at the proprietor and said:

"You lookee and see if um wachee lere, Misler Landlord."

"I'll do it," was the retort. "But I reckon you're a regular sundowner."

"Me allee samee velly muchee smartee, so be."

Meeker lifted the handkerchief, and when he found the box was there yet he gave a nod.

"Now then, boys," he observed, turning to the crowd, "it is either the watch or the mole that's in ther box. We'll soon find out."

He picked up the box and placed it to his ear.

"It's ther watch, by gum!" he exclaimed. "I hear ther tick."

Hop smiled, as though he was much pleased.

"Me velly glad," said he. "Um Mexican man no wantee carry um livee molee aloud in um pockee; no tellee timee velly goodee, so be."

The landlord opened the box and took out the watch.

The trick that had been performed was not at all difficult.

But Hop was so clever with his hands that no one had ever been able to detect him changing the different articles he put under his handkerchief.

He could change a bottle of whisky into a bottle of water just as easily.

But as he had plenty of pockets in the loose-fitting gown he wore, and they all contained everything from a quart bottle to a paper rose, he could do about what he wanted to.

The Mexican was much relieved when he got hold of his watch again.

He fastened it to the heavy gold chain he wore, and then turned to the Chinaman and said:

"You have a drink with me."

"Allee light; my blother dlink, too, so be."

There was a nod of assent and then Hop and Wing took another drink.

Then the big yellow handkerchief disappeared into the clever magician's pocket and the two wended their way to the dining room, leaving the crowd much mystified.

The Chinamen ate their dinner with a relish after that.

"Me allee amee likee Gleaser Gulch, my blother," ob-

served Hop, as he swallowed his coffee. "Me likee stay here longee timee."

"You allec samee likee any place, so be," answered Wing. "You wantee plenty tanglefoot, plenty fun, so be."

Hop looked at him pityingly.

It was evident that he had a poor opinion of his brother's knowledge of things.

As soon as they finished their dinner Hop led the way into the barroom.

He wanted a little whisky to take with him to the camp, for he always made it a point to keep some on hand, if he could.

While it was against the rules Young Wild West had set down, Hop could succeed in breaking them about whenever he saw fit to do so.

The men in the barroom were still talking about the wonderful trick they had seen performed, and when they saw the performer appear again they got ready for something more.

But Hop was not going to do anything further in that line just then.

He knew it was time they got back to the camp.

So he bought a bottle of whisky and stowed it away out of sight.

Then he went on out, followed by his brother, who seemed glad to go.

They had no sooner taken their departure when the Mexican Young Wild West had got the drop on turned and whispered something to his two friends.

The result was that they went out and watched the Chinamen to see where they would go.

"So that is where they are," observed the fellow, who had taken water when our hero had faced him with a drawn revolver. "I suppose they came here to try and get hold of the best land around here. But they shan't do that. We came here expecting to have to fight Miguel alone, but now there are Americans to step in. We shall see who will win!"

"That is right, Juan," nodded one of his companions. "It is for us to get hold of the best that is here. We have the money to do it, and it must be ours."

"Pedro is right, Juan," spoke up the other.

"Quite right, Emanuel."

The three were conversing in Spanish, of course, though they could all speak English fairly well.

Juan was the leader, it seemed.

"It is too bad that our impersonification of Miguel and his two friends has been discovered," he said, after he had thought for a moment. "I thought we might be able to throw suspicion upon them and make it the means of their leaving the Gulch. But this boy, who calls himself Young Wild West, has discovered the trick. But it may turn out all right yet. If we could but make it so that a man who turns out in the possession of Miguel or one of the others, I think it would be all right yet. Men who ride about won't mind an apt to be invited to leave a mining camp."

"That is right, Juan," answered Emanuel, nodding his head approvingly.

"Let us away to our Cave of Gold and try and think of some way to get the best of these Americans, as well as our rivals."

"Agreed!" the two exclaimed.

Then they walked back to the hotel, and after lingering long enough to purchase some whisky and tobacco, they went out and mounted their horses.

No one paid any particular attention to them as they rode up the gulch, for the Americans there had settled down to live in the easy and indifferent fashion of the Mexicans.

The three did not ride far up the gulch before they took a narrow path leading to the rocks above.

The path wound its way along for perhaps a quarter of a mile and then entered a thicket that ran up close to an irregular bluff that was full of shining particles of quartz.

So high was the thicket that when the three horsemen rode into it they were completely concealed from sight.

Around a turn they went and then they came to a cave, the mouth of which was just high enough to admit a horse without a rider.

Juan dismounted and his companions quickly followed suit.

They led the horses into the cave, which was quite a roomy one, with a high natural ceiling.

One part of it was fitted up in pretty good shape for living, for there was a roughly-made table, three stools, some cooking utensils, a rude fireplace and three bunks.

"Here we are at the Gold Cave," exclaimed the leader of the Mexican trio. "Now, then, to think of some way to gain our point. But the first thing we must always do on returning to the cave is to see if everything is all right. It may be that someone will discover the cave some day, and that might make it bad for us."

He turned an angle to the left and entered another cave, his companions leading the horses after him.

This part of the underground place was much larger than the rest, and something like forty feet back there came a flood of light through another entrance.

The horses were promptly tied to one side and then the three men walked over to a niche and looked into it.

"I guess everything is all right," said Juan, with a smile of satisfaction.

Then he pulled out a blanket and a pile of golden nuggets was revealed.

"We got this much by coming to Greaser Gulch, anyhow," said the leader, with a chuckle. "Somebody paid it away for us, and I feel much obliged to him for doing so. I have said more than once. We will go away from here very rich men, friends. I am sure that we know the only route to a market that teams ever travel over, and when we get hold of much gold we will have a dozen teams here to carry it away. But it will go over into Mexico, and that is the bad part of it. We are going to take American gold to Mexican soil, friend. Ha, ha, ha!"

Pedro and Emanuel joined in the laugh.

The gold was soon covered up and then they went to the opening in the rear and looked out.

It was a very wild and picturesque scene that lay before them, but a practiced eye would have noticed that the hilly slope gave evidence of being fit for wagons to ascend and descend.

It ran off to the south, too, and that was why Juan had spoken in such a manner of elation.

"There is only one thing to do," said Juan, after he had thought for a minute or two. "We will watch for Miguel and his two friends, and every time we see them out we will put on our masks and go out where we can be seen. And in the meantime we have two other things to do. One is to get a mask on one of them, and have it discovered, and the other is to frighten Young Wild West and his friends away from Greaser Gulch. I think both can be done."

CHAPTER V.

THE DEN OF COUGARS.

Juan, the Mexican, spoke very earnestly as he said he thought that both the things could be done.

Pedro and Emanuel nodded, as though they thought so, too.

It was evident that they did very little thinking for themselves, and that they allowed their leader to do it for them.

They were of a rather lower order than he, though they were not what might be called scoundrels.

Neither was Juan, for that matter.

He did not intend to make a fight against anyone, relying on his cleverness, instead.

If he could succeed in driving away those who had come to Greaser Gulch for the purpose of getting a corner on the gold that was being dug out, and that which was left in the ground, his purpose would have been accomplished.

But there was another thing on the mind of Juan just now, and he was bound to ont with it.

Pedro started a fire going in the little fireplace in the cave and made ready to get something ready to eat, he sat down on a stool and dropped into a thinking mood.

Pretty soon Emanuel turned to him and asked:

"What are you thinking of, my bold leader? You remind me of a youth who is love-sick."

The Mexican's face lighted up at this, and with a nod, he returned:

"I am love-sick, Emanuel. I saw a very beautiful senorita to-day, and I have been thinking of her ever since, though I have said nothing before this."

Pedro paused in his work and looked up.

"If you saw a very beautiful senorita to-day he must have been one of the American girls with Young Wild West," he said.

"And that is just who she was, Pedro," was the reply. "The girl with the golden hair is surely the most beautiful girl I ever saw. You may not think she is, or Emanuel may not think so. But I do. We all have a choice of our own, you know."

"That is right," Emanuel spoke up. "You are correct when you say I may not think the girl is the most beautiful one I ever saw. I know of one in a little village on the other side of the line, with dark eyes and red lips, who far surpasses the American girl, in my way of thinking."

"And I can say the same thing, though not speaking of the same girl," added Pedro, his dark face lighting up. "The one I am thinking of is my wife, whom I hope soon shall wear finer dresses than any hidalgo's senora in our State."

Juan smiled.

He was the elder of the trio, and without a doubt the ugliest in looks.

"I am going to make love to the American girl," he went on to say, "and if Young Wild West interferes I will turn loose my cougars upon him. Ha, ha, ha! He would have a chance to show his quickness then, boys!"

"He would, indeed!" Emanuel declared. "When you trapped the four beasts I never thought you would have any use for them, unless it were to turn them upon anyone who might seek to rob us of our gold."

"They are getting uglier and more ferocious every day," said Pedro. "Hark, I hear them growling, even now."

True enough, the low growls of savage beasts could be heard not far away.

"I think I will have a look at them," observed Juan, as he arose from the stool. "Perhaps they are hungry. Pedro, give me that foreshoulder of the buck you shot yesterday. We only need the hindquarters. I will feed my pets."

The meat was promptly handed to him, and then the scheming leader of the trio walked over to the rear entrance of the big cave and stepped outside.

Near at hand, and on the left, was a heavy slab of gray rock leaning against what appeared to be a perpendicular wall.

But it really only covered the mouth of a small cave, and in that cave were four fierce cougars, the mother and her cubs, the latter being almost full grown now.

The three Mexicans had found them in the little den when they discovered the big cave, and as the slab of stone was right before the place, they had cleverly raised it and penned the beasts in.

This was two weeks before the opening of our story, and there the cougars had remained ever since, food and water being given them daily by the man who called them his pets.

Juan had conceived the idea to keep them for a while, and to turn them loose upon anyone who might by some means discover the cave and learn of the pile of gold that was hidden in it.

As he fed them now he decided that they should help

him to win the golden-haired girl he had declared himself to be in love with.

He, of course, meant Arietta, the charming sweetheart of dashing Young Wild West.

The cougars fought for the venison and soon had devoured it to the very bones.

Then the Mexican got some water from the little stream that trickled through the cave and poured it down into the pan he had placed there for the purpose.

There was just room enough for him to do this through a crack, without running the risk of feeling the sharp claws of the animals.

He watched them for a few minutes, and then, with a muttered exclamation of satisfaction, turned and went back into the cave.

"My pets are all right, boys," he said to his two followers. "I think they would make Young Wild West move lively if they were turned loose upon him. If he interferes with me in my plans I shall surely turn them loose upon him, too. But after we have satisfied our hunger we must arrange it so we can close the entrance to our cave there. It would not do to give the cougars a chance at us, you know. We must arrange it so a rope can be pulled to allow the beasts their freedom, and at the same time make us perfectly safe from them. It can be done quite easily, I think."

"Surely we can, my bold leader," Emanuel answered.

Pedro was making rapid headway with the meal now, and in a few minutes it was ready for them.

After they had eaten it they sat and smoked for half an hour and then got to work to carry out the plan of Juan.

As there were plenty of boulders that the three could manage to handle, they soon had the entrance walled up just so there was room enough for them to crawl through one at a time.

Then a lariat was tied to the slab that covered the opening of the den of wild beasts in such a way that a strong pull upon it would liberate them.

It took a couple of hours to do this, but when it was done they all appeared to be much satisfied with their work.

"Now," said Pedro, "suppose I climb the tree and find out what is going on in the gulch below?"

"Good!" answered Juan; "go on, my good friend."

The man went out of the cave and climbed a tree which had been used for that purpose before by the looks of the smaller branches that had been broken.

He went up near the top and came down very quickly and ran into the cave.

Miguel and his friends are out again," he said. "They are riding up the gulch, as though in search of someone."

"Perhaps they are looking for us," answered Juan. "Well, now is our chance to go out. Get the horses ready at once. Miguel does not know who we are, and that we followed him from Cala del Abajo. We must force them to leave the Gulch."

In a very few minutes the horses were ready, and then, putting on their masks, the Mexicans rode out of the cave and headed for the gulch below, taking a different route from that they had traversed in getting there.

In a few minutes they reached the gulch in a part of it that was as wild as any part of the region, notwithstanding that the mining camp lay so close by.

But the latter was hidden from sight, owing to a turn in the wide rift.

Juan and his men were certainly daring to do what they did just then.

They knew that the three men they were trying so hard to impersonate had just gone on through the gulch, and yet they turned and rode back toward the claims the miners were at work upon.

Of course they wanted to make it appear that those who had ridden along that way were coming back with their faces concealed by masks.

But Juan and his companions knew more than one way to get up to their cave.

They depended on eluding anyone who might try to catch them.

Boldly they rode along, and in a couple of minutes they came in sight of the collection of shanties, with the hotel almost in the center.

Miners could be seen at work here and there, and without a show of fear they continued on their way, intending to take the nearest path they were to when they found they were attracting the attention of anybody.

Then they would disappear, and when the other three would-be spectators came along they would surely be taken for the Masked Mexicans, as Juan had named himself and his two friends and partners.

It was but a very short time before they found that they were attracting the attention of some of the miners.

They boldly turned their concealed faces so they could be seen plainly and rode on.

Though they were really doing nothing that could be called a crime, they well knew that miners, as a rule, don't like masked men riding around where they are at work.

"I should like to let Young Wild West have another look at us," said Juan, becoming reckless. "Suppose we cut across behind that grove over there and give him a chance, boys?"

"Anything you say, my bold leader," answered Emanuel.

"Certainly!" exclaimed Pedro.

"Come on, then."

They turned their horses, and the next minute they had disappeared from the view of the miners.

"This is going to be the boldest stroke we have played so far," said Juan, with the bravado common to his race. "We will set the whole camp to thinking now, boys."

"That we will!" his companions exclaimed.

Around the grove they rode, knowing well that the camp of Young Wild West lay but a short distance away.

The next minute they came in full view of it. The three scheming rascals were delighted when they

found that Young Wild West and all his friends were there.

They were sitting under the shade of some broad-leaved trees, near the edge of the stream.

The fact was that our friends had decided to take things easy for the balance of the day.

Wild never went right at work in the business he had in view when he came to a mining camp for the first time.

He always liked to get a line on his surroundings and find out what kind of men he had to deal with first.

As the three masked Mexicans rode out into view all hands jumped to their feet.

Juan uttered a low laugh.

"We have awakened them, boys!" he cried jubilantly.

Then he became bold enough to wave a sort of salute to those in the little camp.

They were not much more than two hundred yards away at the time, but the Mexicans were certain that they could get out of sight before our hero or his partners could mount and overtake them.

They did not figure on being shot at, of course, for they felt that they were not doing anything that was really wrong.

But when they saw Cheyenne Charlie grab his rifle and throw it to his shoulder fear seized them right away.

Crang!

A report rang out and Juan felt a sting upon his left ear.

"Caramba!" he exclaimed; "I am shot!"

He clapped his hand to his ear and felt the blood trickling down.

"You are not hurt, Juan," said Pedro, quickly, who seemed to be the most cool of the trio just then. "Come on! We must get away."

Then they rode as though their very lives depended on it.

Around the grove they went at a mad gallop, and then across the gulch to the path that would lead them to their cave.

Once out of sight they breathed a simultaneous sigh of relief.

Juan took out his handkerchief and tied it about his head.

He barely thought the shot had been fired to kill him, and so did his companions.

But they were to find out differently a little later.

Once in their cave, the villains laid low and watched.

They thought it might be possible that they had been pursued.

But when an hour had passed, and there were no signs to indicate that they had, they began to feel a little easier.

An examination had shown that Juan's ear had merely been grazed by the bullet from the scout's rifle.

It had broken the skin just enough to make the blood flow.

A piece of sticking plaster fixed it up all right, and

finally when darkness came on the leader of the masked Mexicans became bold again.

"We will go to the hotel by and by," he said. "No one will know that we were the three masked men who were riding through the gulch to-day. Our word is just as good as that of Miguel."

CHAPTER VI.

THE "BAD" MAN WHO BECAME "GOOD."

"I reckon I marked that galoot, anyhow!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie, as he lowered his rifle after firing the shot at the three Masked Mexicans. "Look at ther galoots go!"

Young Wild West stood watching the receding horsemen, and it was not until they had disappeared from view that he answered the scout.

"You either touched his neck or his ear, Charlie," he said. "I was just watching to see if I could get a line on those fellows. It seems that fancy-dressed greasers all look alike, especially if you can't see their faces."

"They are the three who came last to the hotel, Wild," spoke up Arietta. "I am pretty sure that the one Charlie just touched is the fellow you had the trouble with. I took a good look at him while he was standing out in the road before you. I have a pretty good eye for a human form when I take a notion to look it over good, you know."

"Well, I guess you are pretty nearly right on that, Et," was the reply. "I picked the galoot out as the same one myself; but I thought I might be mistaken. This is a queer sort of a game we have got up against, it seems."

"But I reckon we'll see it through, now that we've started ter, eh, Wild?" Charlie asked.

"Yes, we'll see it through all right, Charlie. We came to Greaser Gulch to see if there was a chance to make money here, but since they have got masked Mexicans riding about the diggings, it is our duty to find out what it means. We'll just take a walk over to the hotel and see who is there right now. Come on, Jim. I guess the girls can take care of the camp. Wing is half asleep, and Hop looks as though he wanted to be."

Both Charlie and Jim were ready to go in a twinkling.

They knew that Wild was anxious to find out if any of the Mexicans were there.

The three walked over, and when they got there they found only a few of the hangers-on present.

"Where is Senor Miguel, Mr. Meeker?" asked Wild, of the landlord, who was behind the bar himself.

"He went out ridin' about fifteen minutes ago," was the reply. "Went up ther gulch, I reckon. He's lookin' fur good payin' property, yer know."

"Did his two friends go with him?"

"Oh, yes. They always travel together, no matter where they go. That's what they've been doin' ever since they come here, I know."

"Well, where are the other three fellows?"

"Oh, they went away a little after you folks left."

Just then in came a miner, who appeared to be not a little excited.

"Ther Masked Mexicans showed up ag'in a little while ago," he said. "They rode right past where I was workin' by ther creek."

"See here," said Wild, suddenly, as he looked at the fellow. "Do you know who those fellows are?"

"No," was the reply. "I only know that there's some-
thin' mighty strange about 'em. They keep showin' up every once in a while, but I ain't heard tell of them doin' anythin' as yet."

"Well, it seems rather strange that three men would be riding around, with their faces covered with masks that way. What do you think about it?"

"I think ther same as you do. If they keep it up they oughter be found out, an' then given twenty minutes ter explain."

"An' if they can't explain, be drove out of ther Gulch," added the hotel keeper.

"I reckon that's about ther right thing," said Cheyenne Charlie, nodding his head. "One thing about it, if yer see a fancy-lookin' greaser with a mark on his left ear, or ther side of his neck, yer kin make up your mind that he's one of ther Masked Mexicans. I marked one of ther three galoots that way a little while ago."

"I heard ther shot fired," nodded the miner; "an' I seen 'em ridin' fit ter break their necks right after it. I reckon they didn't like that kind of a game very much."

"It are blamed funny that they should go around with masks on 'em," said the landlord, shaking his head. "I can't see where ther thing comes in. They ain't tried ter rob nobody, as I know of. They jest show up now an' then, as though they wanted someone ter see 'em on purpose."

"Yes, they are no doubt doing it for effect," our hero answered. "But why they are doing it is something that ought to be found out."

"An' yer kin bet your life that we'll come putty near findin' it out, an' afore many hours, too," exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie.

"I'll bet yer will, too," nodded Meeker. "I've heard tell of ther doin's of you folks, an' I reckon yer ain't goin' ter let a little thing like this stump yer."

Wild walked to the door, as he heard the noise of hoofs.

Four riders were coming up the gulch.

Three of them were Miguel and his friends and the fourth was a total stranger and evidently a cowboy, by his appearance.

He was an American, too, so our hero took it that the three Mexicans must have met him by accident as he was riding for the mining camp.

"Hello, ther!" called out the cowboy as the quartette rode up. "I reckon it ain't all greasers in Greaser Gulch, after all. I'm mighty glad ter see some of ther boys here, an' no mistake. I'm Bill Bolter, m' I'm what they call a

mighty bad man sometimes. Whoopee! Everybody shiver!"

Young Wild West did not pay the least bit of attention to him just then.

He had seen so many of his stripe that he was used to it.

But he was looking sharply at the three Mexicans as they dismounted.

He wanted to find out if he had been mistaken, after all.

But none of them appeared to have anything like a mark in the way of a flesh wound.

"You fellows are all right, as I thought," he muttered under his breath. "I guess you are just what you claim to be."

"As we were turning to ride back through the gulch we met one of your countrymen, Senor West," said Miguel, nodding at the blustering cowboy. "He said he was heading for the gold diggings, so we told him to come right along with us."

"That's right, young fellow," spoke up the cowboy in a very loud voice. "My name is Bill Bolter, an' I'm a bad man!"

"Well, Bill Bolter, I should advise you to be a good man, if you want to stay in Greaser Gulch," Wild retorted, coolly.

"You should advise that, hey?" and the man looked at him in surprise.

"Yes, and I won't charge you anything for the advice, either. Just take it easy now, and don't lose your head."

"Well, by thunder!" and Bill Bolter glared around at the crowd as though he had not quite made up his mind what to do as yet.

He got down from his horse and walked into the bar.

Evidently he had decided that it was best to go a little easy, for the determined look on the face of Cheyenne Charlie was quite a warning.

"You're ther freshest young galoot I ever run across," he said to Wild, as he came in, followed by his partners and the rest of the crowd.

"Easy, stranger," cautioned Meeker. "That's Young Wild West you're talkin' to."

"I don't care if it's Old Wild West," retorted the cowboy. "Gimme a good horn of tanglefoot, an' then I'll show yer how I kin make things hum around here. I'm a mighty bad man, anyhow, but when I git a few drinks in me I'm a blamed sight worse than bad. Whoopee! Everybody have a drink, an' everybody pay fur his own. Ha, ha, ha!"

He was laughing at the sudden change in the looks of the greasers as he wound up the invitation by telling them to pay for their own drinks.

Wild sat down at a table with Miguel.

"The three masked fellows showed up again a little while ago," he said.

"Is that so?" the Mexican asked in surprise. "Well, I hope you are satisfied that we are not the ones."

"Oh, I am quite well satisfied on that point. I have no doubt but that those other fellows are the ones. Well,

find out if they come here again, because Charlie touched one of their ears with a bullet."

"Is that so? I hope you do find out, for a fact, for it is not nice to have anyone think that you are guilty of something, when you are not. We are here for the purpose of speculating and making money, as I told you before, and that is all we are here for."

"Here, you!" bawled out the cowboy just then. "What are yer talkin' about over there at ther table? I don't want no remarks passed about me that I don't hear. Understand that?"

"Shut up!" retorted Wild. "You are not worth talking about."

"Growlin' grizzlies!" cried the bad man. "What do yer think of that? Why, if that galoot wasn't only a boy I'd make him crawl around on his hands an' knees like a dog."

"Make me do it," spoke up Charlie, who could stand it no longer. "I ain't no boy."

"All right," was the quick retort. "Git down on your hands an' knees, you big galoot!"

He whipped out a shooter in pretty quick time and pointed it at the scout.

Whack—thump!

As quick as a flash, Charlie struck his wrist a heavy blow and the revolver flew from his hand and hit the bar.

Biff!

Before the bad man could recover the scout handed him a stiff punch in the ribs and he went down in a heap.

"I reckon you ain't half as bad as yer want folks ter think," remarked Charlie, as he stood over him, ready to hit him the moment he got up. "You're a big bluff, you are!"

"All right," was the reply. "Don't hit me ag'in. I'll admit that I'm harmless. Yer see, I've had my fangs drawed."

There was a loud laugh at this.

"Good boy, Charlie!" called out Wild, who was pleased to see that the scout had not pulled a shooter, instead of acting as he had.

Then he sprang to his feet, and, walking over, assisted the cowboy to arise.

"You're all right, if you only think so," he said. "Just stand up and behave yourself now. Here's your shooter. Forget that you are a bad man while you are in Greaser Gulch."

"Yer kin bet your life I will!" was the reply. "I was only jokin', anyhow. Yer don't s'pose I thought I could run ther place, do yer? Me, a stranger! Well, I reckon not. I just wanted ter have a little fun, that's all."

"Of course, I understand that. You wanted to have a little fun, and if you had been allowed to go on you would have run our full length, wouldn't you?"

"Well, I s'pose I would, young feller. But it's all right. What are you goin' ter take with me? Everybody have a friend. I'll pay for it, landlord."

"That's the kind of order I like ter hear," retorted

Meeker, with a grin. "You're a harmless galoot, all right, but your money is as good as anyone else's."

Bill Bolter, as he called himself, did not raise the least objections when Wild and Jim took cigars.

He had been tamed right at the start, and it was evident that he was going to be a "good" man now.

When he got another drink in him he warmed up a little and looking at Wild, said:

"I'd jest like ter chuck ther dice with you ter see who treats ther crowd ag'in, young feller."

"Me chuckee!"

The words came from Hop Wah, who had slid in through the rear door, unnoticed by anyone.

"That's all right," Wild observed. "Throw with the Chinaman, if you want to. But don't bet any money with him, for if you do you will surely lose it. He can beat the man who invented dice."

"Pshaw! I reckon I never seen ther galoot what could down me at chuckin' dice an' countin' ther spots. I'm bound ter win, if I keep at it long enough. There ain't no galoot livin' what kin win every time he throws, yer know."

"This Chinaman can. So take my advice and don't bet any money with him."

But the advice was lost upon the cowboy.

It only made him more anxious to try conclusions with Hop, in fact.

Meeker put out the leather dice cup he had behind the bar.

Hop promptly dumped out the dice and gave them a close examination.

They seemed to be just the kind he wanted to use, for he smiled and nodded.

"Now, then," said Bill Bolter, "we'll throw fur drinks fur ther crowd, an' I'll bet yer ten dollars I beat your throw."

"Allee light," answered Hop, smiling in his innocent, childlike way. "Puttee up your money, so be."

He quickly produced ten dollars himself and laid it on the bar.

The cowboy covered it and then rattled the dice in the box.

"Thirteen!" he cried, as he rolled the three cubes out upon the bar. "If yer beat that you're a mighty good one."

CHAPTER VII.

HOP PLAYS A GAME OF STUD POKER.

"Lat velly nicee lille thlow," said Hop, as he picked up the dice. "Me likee beatee, allee samee."

"Well, if yer do yer win ten dollars, an' I treat," replied Bill Bolter.

Though no one saw him do it, Hop very cleverly placed three dice he took from his pocket in the cup and kept the others in his hand.

He gave them a good shaking and then rolled them out. Much to the surprise of the lookers-on, two sixes and a five came up.

"Seventeen!" gasped Bolter. "You win, by thunder!"

"Velly nicee lille thlow," observed the Chinaman, and then he knocked over the dice cup and sent the dice scattering.

When he picked them up he substituted the ones that belonged in it for them.

He knew quite well that Wild would not permit him to swindle anybody, so that meant that he would not throw again.

Our hero, of course, knew that Hop carried trick dice with him, and that he was clever enough to work them in whenever he felt like it.

The dice he had just used contained nothing but five-spots and sixes.

Our three friends knew it, but no one else had noticed it.

If they had thought to look what was on the sides of the little cubes as they lay on the bar they would have soon discovered that something was wrong.

"Hop," said Wild, as the Celestial was about to place the money in his pocket, "I guess you had better give the man his ten dollars back. You know you did not win it square."

"Oh, yes, he did!" spoke up the cowboy. "Seventeen beats thirteen all holler!"

"I know it does, but if the dice happen to be wrong so that nothing but sixes and fives can possibly come up, a fellow can't throw less than fifteen."

"Why, them dice is all right," and Bolter looked them over.

"I know they are. But the ones the Chinaman threw with were not all right. He is a sleight-of-hand performer, so you want to look out for him."

Hop handed him back his money, without making a word of protest.

The ten dollars was received, but the cowboy acted very much as though he thought he was not entitled to it.

Hop shook his head sadly and took a seat at a table.

"Give us a drink, landlord," said Bolter. "I reckon I'll treat anyhow, whether he stuck me fair or not."

The drinks were put out, much to the pleasure of the loafers.

Wild now called Charlie and Jim aside and whispered to them:

"I think it will be a good idea for us to try and find the trail of the three Masked Mexicans, boys. What do you say? Shall we get our horses and go out?"

"I think that would be a good idea, Wild," Dart answered promptly.

"Sartm!" exclaimed the scout.

"All right, then. We'll go right away."

Then turning to those in the room, he called out:

"Now, gentlemen, you have heard what I said about our Chinaman being a bad one to gamble with, so I will advise

you to not risk any money with him, no matter what kind of a game he proposes. He has got a sort of *magic* for winning money, and he will do it, no matter what happens."

"Allee light, Misler Wild," Hop answered, cheerfully, just as though the remark was intended for him.

As the three went out the clever Celestial smiled encouragingly at Bill Bolter.

"Me allee samee velly muchee smartee," he observed. "Me beatee um empelor of China when we play pokée. Me win allee samee ten million dollee."

"What did you do with so much money after you won it?" asked Miguel, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Me spendee, allee samee likee goodee fellee; havee biggee time, so be."

"I reekon yer must have a very big time, if yer spent ten million dollars," spoke up the proprietor, with a laugh. "I'm mighty glad I ain't got that much money, fur I know fur sartin that I'd die long afore I could spend it."

"You spendee allee light if you livee in China," Hop assured him.

Then the Chinaman got up and went to the rear of the shanty building.

He wanted to find out what our hero and his partners were up to.

He waited until he saw them mount their horses and ride off up the gulch slowly, and then he came back and took his seat at the table again.

"Me likee play um gamee dlaw pokée," he said, calmly, looking at Bill Bolter in particular.

"We will play with you," spoke up Miguel. "Senor Young Wild West advised us all not to gamble with you, but I am not afraid to risk a little of my money with you, and I am sure my friends are not."

"An' I ain't afraid, either," called out the cowboy. "If I lose it will be my own fault. I kin play stud poker to a standstill, an' I'm jest as good when it comes ter draw."

"We play allee samee stud pokée, len," said Hop, with a smile. "No dlaw um cards."

"Any way at all," remarked Miguel.

"Stud poker it is, then. Boss, jest hand over some cards. Got any chips, or do we go it with ther real money?"

"I don't believe in chips," was the retort. "Money is what counts, every time."

"All right."

The four men sat down at the table.

The three Mexicans seemed to be in a very good humor, and it occurred to Hop that they might be good ones at the game.

But no matter how good they were, he meant to *bust* them.

He felt pretty sure that the cowboy was *more of a bluffer* than anything else, and he made up his mind right there that he was going to take in one good pot before he quit the game.

The cards were brought, and when Meeker had told

then the commission he expected to get from the table, Hop picked up the deck and began to shuffle it.

"Straight stud poker; evety'ing countee, so be," he said with a nod.

"That's it!" exclaimed the cowboy. "Don't make no mistake on it, either."

"Me no makee mistakee; me allee samee velly muchee smartee."

"We'll see how smart yer are afore we're through with yer. How about it?" and he grinned at the three men he had rode into the camp with.

"I think so, senor," answered Miguel, while the others smiled.

Miguel's companions had very little to say at any time, and it seemed as though they were going to be very quiet during the game of stud poker.

Bolter won the deal.

He seemed to be much pleased about it, too, and when Hop, who sat next to him, cut the cards, he dealt them around in a masterful way.

Hop picked up his cards as fast as he received them.

He found when he got the last card that he only had a pair of nines.

But that was enough of a hand to risk a little on, unless there was someone doing something tricky.

The first bet was a dollar.

When it came to Hop, he raised it to five.

It went around again at that, and then he lifted it five more.

Somehow he felt that there was not a hand against him that could beat him.

It was the first deal and he knew very well that Bolter had no chance to fix the cards.

Hop did not care if he lost a hundred or two on the first hand, anyhow, as it would only lead his opponents to think that he was a reckless player.

He kept jumping it up five dollars each time he got the chance, and soon there was nearly two hundred dollars in the pot.

Then Miguel called his raise and the rest followed suit.

"Me got a lilee pair of tens," said the Chinaman, blandly, as he laid down his hand.

"Thunder!" exclaimed the cowboy; "I've got nines."

"And I have sevens," said Miguel.

"A pair of fours is all I have," the man next to him remarked, without bothering to show them.

"I had ace high, but I thought I would stay in," said the last man. "I have seen ace high win more than once."

The clever Chinaman scooped in the pot, winning it without any cheating being done.

Of course he was much pleased at his success, for he had not figured greatly on winning the money that was on the board.

The next hand Hop got three kings, but he did not go in too heavy, for he had an idea that Miguel, who was doing the dealing, had fixed the cards.

He was right, too, for the Mexican showed a hand that had three aces in it when called.

Hop lost about forty dollars on the hand, but he did not care for that, as he was considerable ahead of the game.

Bill Bolter looked at the Chinaman and grinned, as one of the other Mexicans started to shuffle the cards.

"That was ther time yer didn't win," he said.

"Me no win evely timee," was the reply; "me allee samee Melican man."

It seemed that they were all trying to get the best of the "heathen Chinee," for this time Hop found himself the possessor of a king full.

But he was too sharp to be caught, and he dropped out right at the start.

He thought it was altogether too good a hand to get on a deal in a five-handed game, and he was right, too, for the dealer won the pot on four deuces.

The next hand was also won by the man who dealt, and then it came the turn of Miguel.

He was very clever with the cards, as Hop noticed.

This time the Celestial got a pair of aces, but he did not go very strong on them and Miguel scooped in the pot on three treys.

It was now Hop's turn to get in his fine work.

He picked up the cards and deftly run them over.

Then he proceeded to shuffle them, and so slick was he that he completely deceived the players.

He made a misdeal of it purposely before he had dealt the five cards to each, and that gave him another chance.

This enabled him to get the cards together better, and when he dealt again he knew just what each of the players held.

Each man found himself the possessor of a pair, from aces to jacks.

Hop got three fours.

The betting began, and some very tall bluffing followed.

Hop made out that he hesitated about meeting the ante the second time around, but after a little considering he raised it ten dollars.

It was lifted fifty by one of the Mexicans, who held the pair of aces, and Bolter saw it and raised it fifty more on his pair of jacks.

Hop fished out his roll and counted out what was required and then laid down a hundred dollars extra.

"Me allee samee makee you pay to findee ontee whattee me gottee," he said.

The next player hesitated and then called him.

The rest followed suit and then Hop showed his three fours.

He had cleaned up about six hundred dollars and he was satisfied to quit, if they felt like it.

But they did not, and the result was that in another half hour the clever Chinaman had added another six hundred dollars to his pile.

"I reckon I've got enough," said the cowboy, as he lost on a full hand. "Ther heathen is too lucky fur me, boy."

"Well, we were told not to gamble with him, so I sup-

pose it is all right," replied Miguel, and he arose from the table in disgust.

That broke up the game.

Hop amused them after that with some of his card tricks, but he could not get anyone to bet with him.

They all had enough of it, and they were now taking Young Wild West's advice.

When it got near supper time the Chinaman left the hotel and went back to the camp.

He found that Wild and his partners had not yet returned.

"Me havee go lookee putty soon," he said to Arietta.

"Oh, I hardly think they have got in any trouble with the Masked Mexicans, Hop," was the girl's retort. "But if they don't show up by the time it is dark I will begin to think they have."

"Me go finde, len."

Wing soon began making preparations for the evening meal.

At length he had it ready, but still there were no signs of the return of the young deadshot and his partners.

The girls now began to think that there really was something the matter.

CHAPTER VIII.

"WHERE IS ARIETTA?"

Wild and his two partners were not long in finding a path that led up out of the gulch.

They did not know whether the Masked Mexicans had gone that way or not, but they thought it worth while to follow the path.

As luck would have it, they went right past the place where the cave of the rascally trio was located.

Then a long search followed in the vicinity.

Sometimes they were close to the very spot they were anxious to find, but never once did they get in sight of the cave.

They rode fully fifteen miles away from the mining camp, and then returned by another route.

By this time the afternoon was pretty well gone, and when they finally came in sight of the little collection of shanties it was beginning to get dark.

Then it was that they found themselves striking a little luck.

As they were rounding a bend in the gulch they suddenly saw three horsemen ride down the hill and head straight for the mining camp.

They were not masked, so they easily recognized them as the men they were sure were the Masked Mexicans.

Wild brought his horse to a halt and held up his hand for silence.

If the rascally trio had looked back they would surely have seen our friends watching them.

But that they did not do.

As soon as they were out of sight Wild nodded to his partners and said:

"Boys, I guess we have been making the search too far away from home. The chances are that the villains are located somewhere right near here. I know exactly where they came down the hill, so we will ride there and go up. It is quite likely that they have some kind of hiding place up there; you can bet on that!"

"Sartin," nodded the scout. "What would they be doin' around here if they didn't? Meeker says as how they're strangers in Greaser Gulch, an' yet there's some of ther miners as says they have seen three masked mea as long ago as a couple of weeks. They've got a snug place liere somewhere, yer kin bet."

"Well, just as soon as they get out of sight and hearing we'll go up there."

They waited about five minutes, and then Wild rode boldly for the spot he had seen the three emerge from and take the trail to the mining camp.

They found a path, sure enough, but it was pretty well concealed by the rank undergrowth that grew there.

If it had been a little darker it is doubtful if they would have discovered it.

"Come on, boys," said Wild. "The horses will take us right to the place, most likely. There is a trail here, but the bushes cover it pretty well."

They went on up in single file, our hero's intelligent stallion, Spitfire, leading the way.

If they had struck that particular path when they first came out they would have reached the cave of the three villains right away.

But it was better late than never.

"They will be wondering at the camp where we are staying so long, I suppose," said Wild, in a low tone of voice, as the horses came down to a walk of their own accord. "It is too bad that we couldn't find this path sooner. Then we would have caught the rascals right where they were hidin'."

"But it will be just as well to find out where their place is, Wild," answered Jim Dart. "Then we can come and get them any time we see fit."

"Well, that is so, too, Jim. I guess it is all right, outside of the time we have lost riding around."

It was not long before Spitfire came to a halt.

It was now dusk, and the overhanging limbs shaded the place so much that it was really dark there.

Wild dismounted, for he felt pretty sure that there were no more than the three Mexicans they had seen ride down into the gulch.

And if there did chance to be, he was pretty sure that he and his partners could take care of them.

Wild was no sooner on the ground than Charlie and Jim had followed suit.

Neither spoke a word, but on Jim left his horse standing and felt his way ahead in the dark.

Three or four steps and he was right at the mouth of

the underground retreat the Masked Mexicans called the Gold Cave.

Our hero paused until his partners were at his side.

Then he motioned them to stay right where they were and boldly stepped into the cave.

It was dark as a pocket there, and, knowing that it was hardly likely that anyone would remain there without a light, he resolved to take the risk of striking a match.

He moved to the right until he got close against the rocky wall of the cave before he did so.

Then, with a revolver grasped in his left hand, he struck the match he had pulled from his pocket.

He held it off to his right, and as the flickering flame lighted that portion of the dark place he got a quick view of his surroundings.

Hearing nothing that indicated that there was anyone there, he stepped forward, holding the match in his hand.

He got to the turn that showed the part of the cave the three men used as a habitation just as the match gave a flicker and the light expired.

Then he struck another and took a good look.

There was the table and stools, and the bunks the Mexicans slept upon, and everything was still.

"Come on, boys," said Wild. "I reckon we're the only ones here just now."

Charlie and Jim hurried to his side.

They were now satisfied that he had spoken correctly.

Wild lighted another match, and, seeing a lantern on the table that was ready to be lighted, he promptly lifted the globe and touched the flame to the wick.

The next moment they had plenty of light to look through the cave.

"Well, I guess we're all right now," said the dashing young deadshot, with a ring of triumph in his voice. "We have found the hang-out of the Masked Mexicans; now we must find out why it is they go about masked."

"It won't take long ter do that now," observed the scout, with a chuckle. "I reckon we kin spy on 'em putty easy, now that we know jest where ter come ter do it."

It was only natural that they should make a search of the cave.

But they did not think of going out through the back entrance, where the den of cougars was located.

For some reason the beasts remained perfectly silent just then, so they did not discover their presence.

But they did find the niche and the pile of gold in it.

"Great gimlets!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie; "I wonder where ther galoots got that from?"

"That is hard to tell," answered our hero. "But, by the way they are acting, it would appear that they did not come by it honestly. However, it does not belong to us, so we have no right to touch it. We will leave it just as we found it."

"There must be eight or ten thou and dollars worth in that pile," remarked Jim, as he looked it over.

"All of that, I should say."

"And the way it looks, it has been here a good while.

There are cobwebs here that have been formed since it was dumped in the niche."

"Maybe ther galoots found it here," suggested the scout.

"That might be. They may have murdered the owner, for all we know."

They speculated over it for a few minutes and then our hero covered the gold with the blanket he had taken from it and turned from the spot.

They went to the rear entrance and looked out, but did not attempt to go through.

A couple of minutes later they went out by the way they had entered, and mounting their horses, turned them toward the gulch.

They were soon down into it and riding toward the lights that showed from several of the shanties along the creek.

If they had taken a short cut to their camp they might have met with something that would have set their hearts beating lively, but they chose to go on around and ride up to the hotel.

Wild was pretty sure he knew just where the path was, but he did not figure on there being two or three more places that greatly resembled the beginning of the path.

Reaching the hotel, they dismounted and went in.

A quick glance told them that the men they were looking for were not there.

Wild walked over to the end of the bar, where Meeker was standing, and said in a low voice:

"Have you seen anything of the three galoots we have set down as the Masked Mexicans?"

"No," was the reply. "They ain't showed up here since they went away a little after dinner time."

Our hero was not much surprised to hear this.

He thought the villains would not be fools enough to come back to the hotel, especially if one of them bore the marks of a bullet on his ear.

"Come on, boys; we'll go to the camp," he said.

They went over and found only Anna, Eloise and Wing there.

"Where is Arietta?" Wild asked, right away, as it flashed upon his mind that something was wrong.

"Why, she would go and look for you," answered Anna. "We tried to make her wait, but she said no. She went out about ten minutes ago, and Hop left right after her. He said he was going to see that she did not get into any trouble."

Young Wild West gave a start.

"Which way did she go?" he asked.

"She took a short cut that way," was the reply, and Anna pointed up the gulch, where they had been themselves but a few minutes before.

Our hero looked around and saw that the horse of his sweetheart was there.

"She went on foot, eh?" he said. "Well, I'll soon find her, then. You stay here, boys. I won't be gone very

long. Et should not have taken the risk of leaving the camp after dark."

Leaving his horse for his partners to take care of, the dashing young deadshot started off in the direction the scout's wife had indicated.

Wild did not think that the Masked Mexicans could have run across Arietta; yet the fact that they had not come to the hotel seemed rather strange.

It might be that the three villains had come upon her suddenly and surprised her.

He pushed on his way and soon passed through the little grove that lay between the camp and the side of the gulch where the path led up to the hidden cave.

Not a sign of the girl or of the Chinaman did he see.

"It is queer," he thought, as he came to a pause. "Where could they have gone to? Why didn't Arietta wait, anyhow?"

Then he called out at the top of his voice:

"Hey, Hop! Where are you?"

There was no reply.

He knew very well that if either the Celestial or the girl heard the call they would answer promptly.

The boy now became convinced that something had happened to his sweetheart.

He could not help laying her mysterious disappearance to the three men he had seen come down the hill into the gulch, and the fact that they had not showed up in the mining camp made it look all the more that way.

Wild was always cool, no matter what the circumstances were.

He did not allow himself to get nervous and excited.

"The scoundrels!" he muttered. "If they have caught Et and carried her off to their den they will wish they had never seen Greaser Gulch. And if they have even harined Hop they shall suffer for it. I will go to that cave and find out if they are there."

Having come to this decision, he started to find the path that was concealed by the thick bushes.

In a very few minutes he thought he had found it.

But he had not. It was a path all right, but not the one that led to the cave of the Masked Mexicans.

Wild went up the hill cautiously and soon he was far enough to be at the mouth of the cave, he thought.

He searched around for it, but could not find it.

The boy was not a little puzzled.

And all this while Arietta was in great danger, no doubt.

The boy searched around through the darkness, but at length he was forced to admit to himself that he was lost.

After half an hour of it he stopped in a little glen and lighted a match.

The spot was not familiar to him.

It was so dark there that he could not see the sky, either, and that made it almost impossible for him to find his way to the gulch.

It was single pine-work now with Young Wild West, so he took a course that he hoped would fetch him out all

right. And luckily for him, it did, for he soon found himself descending the hill, with the lights of the shanties before him.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT HAPPENED TO ARIETTA.

Arietta had got it in her head that something had happened to her dashing young lover and his partners.

The girl had a will of her own, and in spite of the protests Anna and Eloise made, she decided to start out and look for them when it became dark.

Her companions were of the opinion that the three would show up in due time all right, but Arietta was obdurate.

"It is my opinion that they have met the Masked Mexicans, and that something has happened to them," she said. "I will go up the gulch a little way, and see if I can find any tidings of them. I won't be gone but a few minutes, so don't be alarmed."

That was all she said before going.

The brave girl really thought it was her duty to go, for there was no one else to do it.

Hop had wanted to go, but she knew very well that he was a very poor one to send out haphazard.

If he had known just where to go it would have been different, and his cleverness might be of great use in helping Wild and his partners out in case they really were in trouble.

Arietta had also convinced herself, by reasoning, that the Masked Mexicans were located somewhere very close to the mining camp.

That only made it more apparent that Wild, Charlie and Jim had run against them, and had been trapped by them.

That the three men who went about with masks on their faces were villainous outlaws, there for the purpose of plundering those they could get hold of, the girl was firmly convinced.

She could not look at it in any other way.

Why should men who were not villains go about with masks covering their faces?

Arietta did not go very fast in crossing the rather wide mouth of the gulch.

Just as she reached the clump of trees that formed the grove near the stream she heard the sounds made by approaching horses.

She peered through the darkness and quickly made out the forms of three horsemen coming that way.

It was only natural that she should think they were Wild and his partners, and her fears concerning them promptly left her.

A single glance told her that they were heading straight for the camp she had left but two or three minutes before, and then she felt certain that it was Wild returning.

As the horses entered the grove she lost sight of them, but she knew they would have to pass her, so she waited.

The next minute they loomed up before her.

The horses were on a jog trot, but she could not see them, or the riders, plain enough to distinguish them.

"Wild!" she called out, suddenly, as they were within a dozen feet of her.

Instantly the three horses were reined in.

Then Arietta sprang forward, expecting to be drawn upon the back of the gallant sorrel and borne to the camp by her dashing young lover.

She discerned a pair of outstretched arms, and then she leaped to them and was lifted before the rider upon the back of the horse.

Then it was that a sudden chill came over the girl and her heart ceased to beat for the moment.

She had made an awful mistake.

It was not Young Wild West who had lifted her to the back of the horse.

But before the surprised girl could utter a cry a heavy hand was clapped over her mouth.

An exclamation in the Spanish tongue followed, and then some words.

Then, in less time than it takes to record it, Arietta was rendered helpless by a piece of rope being passed about her body, pinning her arms.

Next a broad sash that was quickly torn from one of the villains was tied about her mouth tightly, just giving her a chance to breathe through her nostrils.

"Come, boys!" exclaimed Juan—for it was certainly the three Masked Mexicans—"we came out to do a little spying on the camp of Young Wild West, and one of his fair senoritas has come to meet us. I think it is the one I wanted, too. Oh, but this is indeed great!"

Arietta did not understand a great deal of Spanish, but she knew about what the villain was saying.

She struggled to free herself, of course, but it was useless, for Juan had her foul.

Back to the path that led through the bushes the villains went, and in a very few minutes they were in their cave.

They were approaching the place to go up the hill just as Young Wild West and his partners were disappearing around the bend on their way to the hotel.

Juan had caused a halt to be made right after they reached the edge of the grove, as he wanted to get an idea of what was best to be done.

If Juan's intention to ride direct to the hotel, but when he got it in his head that they should ride up close to the camp of our friends he felt that he must do it.

The leader of the Masked Mexicans was getting more restless every hour, it seemed.

So they sprung off to the left and rode around to the other side of the camp.

Then they dismounted and Juan himself crept up close to it and made his discovery that Young Wild West and both his partners were missing.

By listening to the conversation he soon found out that the girls were worried about their absence.

It was not quite dark enough, or the villain would have swooped down upon them and seized the girl right then and there.

He decided to wait until a little later.

Then they would ride up, just as if they belonged there, and before the inmates of the camp could discover who they were the girl he wanted could be seized and borne away.

That was the plan that the villain laid down.

It was a pretty good one, but he did not have to put it all into effect, for Arietta helped him out.

When the three villains had gone back, and then started through the grove to ride up to the camp on their rascally mission they were of course much surprised to hear the girl call out to them.

Juan had acted quickly and had succeeded in accomplishing his foul purpose with very little trouble.

Once in the cave, the three villains gave vent to their pleasure by shaking each other's hands.

They had donned their masks when they set out to make the attempt to capture Arietta, and when the lantern on the table was lighted the girl could see them.

But she could not talk.

Emanuel, who had lighted the lantern, held fast to it in a puzzled way, and the girl noticed this, as well as his villainous companions.

"What is the matter?" asked Juan.

"I am sure that the lantern was warm, just as if it had been lighted a very short time ago," was the reply.

"Nonsense. That could not be. It was lighted when it got dark in here before we went out, but it could not have remained warm all that time."

"Perhaps it was not out when we left, and went out after," suggested Pedro.

"It must be that such was the case," nodded Emanuel, his face lighting up. "I am positive that the light had not been out many minutes, though, for when I lifted the globe I could feel the heat."

"It might be that somebody has been here," said Juan, paling under his mask.

Then, while Pedro held the helpless girl, he picked up the lantern and made for the niche.

A sigh of relief escaped his lips when he saw that the gold was there.

"There has been no one here, that's sure," he exclaimed. "Now to find a nice, comfortable place to put the young lady. Pedro and Emanuel, you can talk about your Mexican beauties all you like, but this Americano senorita is the one for me. My, was ever a man so lucky as I? Why, it is more of a pleasure for me to win her than it would be to get all the gold in Greaser Gulch in my possession."

"You talk well, Juan," Emanuel answered, shaking his head. "If it don't bring trouble on us, that is the thing."

"Trouble? Pshaw! What trouble can it bring? If

Young Wild West should come here looking for the girl the cougars will tear him to pieces! Trouble? Ha, ha, ha! Trouble for Young Wild West, but not for us. With him out of the way we will soon be able to finish our business here in the gulch. I expect this very night to get possession of a claim that will pay us handsomely. This morning I was talking to a fellow of our own race at the hotel, and he told me that he knew a man who wanted to sell out. I am to meet him to-night. It was my intent to go to the hotel when we started out, as you know, but the thought of the lovely maiden in Young Wild West's party drew me to the camp they occupied. I caught her—she came to my arms, in fact! And she spoke in such an endearing way, too. Ha, ha, ha!"

The conversation was carried on in Spanish, and it was little of it that Arietta could understand.

But when she heard her young lover's name mentioned two or three times she knew quite well that the three Mexicans were his enemies.

She was of course not a little frightened at the predicament she was in, but she had faith enough in Wild to feel that she would soon get out of it.

Arietta could readily imagine that Emanuel had found that the lantern was warm when he lighted it.

His actions, rather than his words, told her that.

This gave her the thought that it might be that Wild and his partners had found the cave, and had left it but a short time before.

The girl was very good at figuring out things, and she was ready to grasp the least bit of a clew to base her hopes upon.

Thus far she had been treated as gently as she could be under such circumstances.

The Masked Mexicans had not hurt her any, and they had been rather careful when they bound her and placed the sash over her mouth.

"My pretty señorita," said Juan, speaking in English and putting on a very kindly tone of voice, "I trust that you will forgive me for this rash act. But I became infatuated with your rare beauty the moment I saw you, and the more I thought of you the more the desire to wed you became possessed upon me. I am a gentleman, and not a bold robber, as you may think."

Arietta's blue eyes flashed scornfully.

But she could not speak.

The girl was now quite calm, for she had become a very apt pupil of Young Wild West in that regard.

"Pedro," said the leader, "just fit up a nice corner over there, where it is dry and the air is pure. Draw a blanket across, so the señorita may be secluded from this part of the cave. She must have the best accommodations we can give her until I can gain her consent to wed me. Then I will take her to Calla del Abajo and the ceremony will be performed."

The look that the girl gave him when he said that was enough to almost wither him.

It should have told him that such a thing as gaining her consent would never be.

Pedro hastened to do the bidding of the villain, for he really was but a servant, after all, since Juan was the son of a wealthy old planter, and he was nothing but an adventurer who had drifted into the friendship of the other two by the merest chance.

Emanuel was about on the same footing as Juan, but he allowed Juan to act as the leader in the venture they had put forth.

It is hardly likely that either Pedro or Emanuel thought a great deal of the scheme of kidnapping Arietta, but since it had been done they seemed ready to stand by him, no matter what happened.

It did not take long to fit up the corner as well as it could be done with what they had to do it with, and then Arietta was conducted to it.

"Now," said Juan, "I am going to relieve you of the gag we were forced to use upon you. Whether it will stay out of your mouth or not depends upon how you act. If you scream it will be put back again, and if you decide to keep quiet it will not. It is for you to decide, fair lady."

Another lantern had been lighted, and, placing it on the ground, he untied the sash that had kept the girl from crying out, or even talking.

All three of the Mexicans still wore their masks, for they seemed afraid to let the girl see their faces.

"I suppose you know that you will suffer for this, you fiend in human form!" were the first words to come from Arietta.

"Don't, don't!" cried the man, almost pleadingly. "I don't like to hear such cruel words from your pretty lips."

"Young Wild West will be after you before long," went on the brave girl. "Then you will wish you had never been born. He will make you understand what it is to die!"

"I think I will wait until you have got yourself in a better humor," said Juan, letting the blanket drop and stepping back to his two companions.

CHAPTER X.

HOP AND THE MASKED MEXICANS.

It will now be proper for us to see what had happened to Hop Wah, whose disappearance was as strange to our hero and his friends as that of Arietta.

The Chinaman left the camp just about three minutes later than Arietta did.

He started to follow her, but at the edge of the woods he got on the wrong path, and a thick clump of undergrowth was between him and the spot where she was when the horsemen rode up.

He heard the girl cry out the name of her lover, and

then, when the horses were brought to a halt, the Celestial thought sure that Wild and his partners were coming back.

He ran around, so as to get there before they went on to the camp, and when he suddenly heard the horses going in an opposite direction he made up his mind that something was wrong.

Reaching the path, Hop ran after them as fast as he could.

He was just in time to catch sight of them as they rode across the open, and in the starlight he was able to see that one of the steeds carried a double burden.

"Hip hi!" exclaimed the Chinaman. "Someting allee samee long! Misler Wild no comee. Missy Alietta allee samee gettee catchee! Me havee findee out, so be."

He ran along in hot pursuit, and by good luck he managed to see just where the three horsemen disappeared from view.

Hop marked the spot by a big rock that loomed up just before it, and to the left.

Panting from his swift run, the Celestial reached the spot and tumbled upon the hidden path almost the first thing.

He could not see it, of course, but by pushing his way along there was no trouble to keep upon it, for so thick were the bushes on either side that he could not have got through them without considerable difficulty.

He kept right on until he came to the mouth of the cave, which was more by good luck than good judgment, since there were places where he might have turned from the path when quite near to the end of it.

Hop did not know he had reached anything like a cave until he was fairly inside it, so dark was it there.

Then he suddenly caught the glimmer of a light, and heard the sound of voices.

The Chinaman became very cautious in an instant.

Dropping softly to the ground, he crept slowly toward the light.

He had no weapon in his hand, for he figured that it would be better to be caught without one than with it, as he would then have a chance to fool his captors by his clever, innocent way.

But Hop did not mean to get caught if he could help it.

He was going to get the best of the three men and get Arietta away from them if he possibly could.

He was not going to make the attempt until he satisfied himself that there was a good chance to do it, however.

If he thought there would be too much risk about it he would simply go back to the camp and find out if Wild and his partners had returned yet.

If they had he would fetch them to the cave as soon as possible.

"Me mache allee samee putty quickee gittee way," he thought, as he moved forward. "Me cuttee Missy Alietta loose 'ben me mache allee samee big bang and blowee um bad mens over, so be."

He pulled the pocket that held a big cracker that was

capable of making a noise like a small cannon, and laughed under his breath.

In another minute he came in full view of the interior of the part of the cave the Masked Mexicans used for their quarters.

He saw them standing in the light that came from the lantern one of them had lighted but a short time before, and when he heard them talking he pricked up his ears.

But it was the same as Greek to him, and he only shook his head.

Hop then got himself in a comfortable position, and sat down and watched.

When Arietta had been placed in the quarters that had been fitted up for her Hop nodded in a pleased way.

He now knew just where to go to place his hands on the helpless girl, in case he made the attempt to rescue her without the assistance of anyone.

A few minutes later, when he heard Juan talking to her, and the voice of Arietta sounded upon his ears, he was more pleased than ever, because he now knew that she was in the proper condition to help herself, providing she got half a show.

Hop was not long in making up his mind what to do.

Pulling out the big cracker he had in his pocket, he broke the end off the fuse, and then he struck a sulphur match.

The draught of air that was going through the cave put out the match, and when Hop stepped back a little, so he could get out of the draught, Pedro raised his head and gave a sniff.

The Mexican had got a whiff of the odor from the match.

The villain started for the spot where the odor came from right away, without saying a word to his companions.

Hop was unconscious of this, of course.

As he struck the second match Pedro was within six feet of him.

Just as he was about to apply the flame to the fuse of the cracker the Mexican leaped upon him and caught him about the neck.

"Hip hi!" cried Hop, in surprise, and then he let both the lighted match and the cracker fall from his hands.

"I have caught a Chinaman, Juan," said Pedro, as he struggled to hold his captive. "Hurry up and help me."

Juan and Emanuel were at his side in a hurry.

Then the three dragged the struggling Chinaman back into the light.

"Whatee mattee?" asked Hop, affecting great innocence. "Where um Melican girl, so be?"

"Ha!" exclaimed Juan, putting on a fierce manner; "so you followed the American girl, did you?"

"Lat light," answered Hop, boldly. "Me allee samee velly muchee smartee; me finde out where um Masked Mexicans be, so be."

"You are very clever, it seems. But you know, we don't like Chinamen much."

"Me allee samee goodee Chinee."

"Oh! So you are good, as well as smart, eh? Well, you're a wonder, I imagine. I'll have a little talk to you later."

Hop was still holding the cracker in his hand. Suddenly Juan saw it.

"What is that?" he demanded.

"Makee allee samee blow uppee. Me showee!"

"I think you will not show us here," spoke up one of the others. "I'll jest take that thing. It may come in mighty handy, providing somebody else comes after us. We could light it and throw it at them."

"Lat allee samee velly true," Hop answered, smiling blandly.

Juan looked at the cracker.

He had seen such things before, and of course knew the nature of them.

"So you meant to light that and throw it in here?" he said, questioningly.

"Yes," retorted Hop, telling the truth.

"And then you would have tried to get the girl away from us, I suppose?"

"Yes, me tly gittee Missy Alietta go back to um camp."

"Well, you shall die for this. The life of a Chinaman is not worth much, anyway."

"Um life of inn Chinee allee samee worth muchee as nm gleaser," Hop answered, coolly.

"Good!" cried Arietta, from behind the curtain in the corner. "You know what you are talking about, Hop."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Juan, and then his two companions laughed also, probably just because he did.

"Velly funny," observed Hop, who had adopted peculiar tactics.

He sat down on one of the stools and leaned his elbow on the table.

Then he took three dice from his pocket and carelessly rolled them on the table.

The Masked Mexicans looked at him in a way that showed both surprise and curiosity.

"You no lettee um Melican girl go?" asked the Chinaman, after a short interval, during which he kept rolling out the dice and picking them up.

"No!" retorted Juan, speaking almost fiercely, to show how much he meant it.

"You killee me?"

"Yes!"

The answer was more fierce than before.

"Me chukee dicee to see whether um do or not!"

As Hop said this the three villains looked at each other.

They were standing with revolvers in their hands, so it would be impossible for the Celestial to get away if he started to run, without being shot.

They had been expecting that he would make such an attempt.

But to hear him propose to throw dice to see whether he might live or die was something entirely unexpected.

"You son a toot!" burst Juan, after he had recovered from his surprise.

"Me no foolee; me allee samee velly smarte Chinee," was the reply. "You say you wantee keepce Missy Alietta; and you wantee killee me. Me wantee chukee um dicee to see if you do. You win and you keepce um girl and killee me; me win, len me and Missy Alietta walkee out and go 'boutee um business, so be."

"That is a great proposition," said Emanuel, turning to the leader. "You wouldn't expect a common Chinaman would make such. Do you think he really means it, Juan?"

"Of course he does. He is smart enough to know that he has got to die, anyhow, and he wants to get the chance to live. But I don't propose to make a gambling game out of this. My pets will be good and hungry in the morning, and the Chinaman shall feed them. That will be the best way to dispose of him, I guess."

Emanuel and Pedro looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders.

It was evident that they did not approve of such treatment for the prisoner.

Hop was watching them, and he knew that what the leader had proposed to do with him must be something pretty bad.

He knew that when he spoke of his pets he must refer to something in the line of beasts or reptiles.

He wanted to find out, so he looked at Juan and asked:

"Makee me seedee um pets?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"Whattee kind of pets?"

"Lions."

"Me likee seedee lions, so be."

"Well, these are regular congars—the kind that we have in the wilds of Mexico. They would no doubt be pleased to have you feed them. They will like the flesh of a Chinaman quite as well as that of a deer or bear, perhaps."

Hop shook his head.

"Ley no likee eatee Chinee," he declared, just as though he was sure of it. "No eatee me; me no likee."

Again Juan laughed.

It was doubtful if he meant what he said; but there was one thing about it, and that was that he did not propose to allow the Chinaman to go free.

"Me likee chukee um dicee to see if me and um Melican girl go flee," said the clever Chinaman, after a pause.

He was pretty well satisfied now that the men were not bad enough to kill him in cold blood, even if they did mean to keep Arietta.

But it was doubtful if they would take her away when they found out that she could not be induced to give her consent to marry Juan.

Hop was just as confident as anything that Wild and his partners would come alone before many hours.

He knew them so well that he thought they could not possibly miss coming.

Anyhow, the Mexican had told him that he was to be kept there till morning, and that ~~would~~ that he was safe practically.

Neither of the villains had paid any attention to his suggestion that they throw the dice, so he began rolling them out again, all by himself.

Pretty soon he took a couple of pieces of money from his pocket and laid them on the table.

He placed his right hand on one piece and the left on the other, and then shoved them together.

"Me havee lille game," he said, as though talking to himself, and then he threw, first with one hand and then the other.

The hand that won pulled the money in, and then more was put up.

Pedro got very much interested as the queer game continued.

"I play with you," he said, suddenly.

This was what Hop was striving for.

"Allee light," he said. "Me chuckee um dicee for fivee dollee with you, so be."

"I will try you," was the smiling reply.

"I will come in the game, too," said Emanuel.

"And I will watch and see that the Chinaman does not cheat, or try to get away," spoke up Juan.

Then the dice game began.

CHAPTER XI.

ALL BUT ESCAPE.

The game became so interesting after a while that Juan felt forced to go in it himself.

He did so, and then the stakes became larger.

Hop was playing a game to win money, and to gain time, too.

He had his crooked dice handy, and every now and then he would use them and win a pot.

But he played with the straight dice the most of the time, since he found he was holding his own pretty well.

The Masked Mexicans seemed to have plenty of money, and they lost it gradually, like dead-game sports.

For an hour the game continued.

Hop now figured that he was a thousand dollars ahead of the game.

But he was willing to keep on playing until something turned up that would help him to get Arietta away from the villains.

The girl was secured in the corner of the big cave, and it was impossible for her to get out.

Hop now had the game down to a system.

He aimed to win every third pot, unless the regular dice were in his favor between times.

No clever was he that the three Mexicans never once suspected there was anything wrong going on.

The more he lost the more Juan wanted to raise the stakes.

Pedro demurred at this.

"I like a game of ten dollars," he said. "It will last longer, if one has a run of bad luck."

"We thlow for um ten dollee, so be," remarked Hop, "and me bettee Juan hundred dollee on um outsidee."

He had heard them call each other by name long enough to get them down fine.

"That will be a good way to do it," Pedro answered. "Are you willing to do it, Juan?"

"Certainly," was the reply. "The Chinaman is the winner so far, and I want a chance to either lose more or get my money back. I will bet him a hundred dollars each time we throw. Let the game go on at ten dollars a corner, and I am in on that, too. Each time I win now I will win a hundred and thirty dollars."

"And evely timee you losee you losee um hundred and ten dollee," added Hop, smiling blandly.

"Yes, you have got that right, Mr. Chinaman."

"Me namee Hop."

"Oh, all right, then. I'll call you Hop after this."

"Me velly goodee Chinee."

"You seem to be."

"You no killee."

"Go on and play the game. I am interested now, and I want to play. It relieves my mind from the worriment about the beautiful American girl."

"Missy Alietta velly nicee girl, so be. She likee Young Wild West velly muchee."

"She will learn to like me better, I think."

"Maybe, so be."

The money was up now, and Pedro led in the throwing.

Hop wanted to win the first time that the side bet was in operation, so he got the three trick dice out and held them in his hand.

Pedro rolled out fourteen, which was a pretty good throw.

"I guess I won't win the pot, but I'll go for the side bet now," said Juan, who came next.

Then he rolled out fifteen.

"Whew!" he whistled. "That is better than I thought."

"Lat velly nicee lille thlow," observed the Celestial, smiling sweetly.

Then Emanuel took his turn and threw only ten.

It was now Hop's turn.

"Here um go fur un velly big thlow, so be!" he exclaimed, and then he cleverly rolled out the dice that had only sixes and fives on them.

He could not possibly get any less than fifteen, so that would tie Juan.

But he got more, for a six and two fives came up.

"Me winnee!" he exclaimed. "Lat benteo um fifteen."

"Caramba!" cried Juan. "The Chinaman has the dice bewitched."

Hop scooped in all the money in sight.

"Me velly lucky, so be," he smilingly said, as he picked up the dice and changed them.

"Well, I will make it two hundred dollars this time, unless you are afraid to."

"Me no afriad."

Hop did not use the trick this time, but he threw eleven with the regular ones.

Emanuel won the money in the pot, and as Juan did not get as much as eleven, Hop won the two hundred dollars.

"Four hundred this time!" said the leader of the Masked Mexicans, becoming desperate.

"Me no care if um makee fivee hundled," retorted the Celestial.

"Five it is, then," and the money was counted out and laid down.

It was quickly covered, for Hop had plenty of money, besides that which he had won.

He let Juan win this time, just to bait him on.

But there is no use in describing the gambling game.

Suffice it to say that it was kept up until the early morning hours, and when it stopped Hop was a winner by two thousand dollars.

All this time Arietta had been listening and hoping for something to turn up in her favor.

She knew that Hop would do all he could for her, but as he was so wrapped up in the dice game he would hardly do anything as long as it continued.

When it was over she prepared herself for something to happen.

The girl's hands were tied securely, and strive as she might, she could not get them from behind her.

If she had had the use of her hands she would not have hesitated to step out and open fire on her captors, for she had a revolver in the bosom of her dress that the villains had failed to find when they made her a prisoner.

Arietta had the courage and the skill to put up a fight against the three masked villains.

But with her hands tied she was helpless.

The time hung very heavily upon her.

When the game was over Juan looked at his companions and said:

"The Chinaman has won considerable of our money, but we are not thieves, so he shall keep it as long as he lives."

"Yes, if he don't spend it," retorted Pedro.

"But if he feeds the cougars in the moruing he may not live."

"He has done nothing that he should die, Juan."

Pedro spoke his thoughts and looked at his leader steadily.

"Well, he must be tied, so he cannot escape, anyway. Please do that. Emanuel will help you."

Hop looked around for some avenue to escape, but they were too quick for him.

He was seized and bound, and when Arietta heard and understood what was taking place her heart sank again.

She must now depend on her dashing young lover, and

she knew it was very doubtful if he could find where the cave was in the darkness of the night.

If he could he would have been there long before this time.

Hop was forced to lie down between Emanuel and Pedro, the bunks being shifted to suit the purpose.

Then Juan walked over to the curtained corner and called out, politely:

"Good-night, my fair Americano! Console yourself to the fact that you are to go with me to Mexico and become my bride. I will be a very rich man in a few weeks, and then you will live the life of a titled lady."

"You will never live long enough for that," was the defiant retort. "Young Wild West will shoot you before that. I will give you just about four more hours to live. It will be daylight by that time, and a little after. You will then find out that you have made a big mistake in kidnapping me."

"We shall see, my pretty one. If Young Wild West finds this place he will be torn to pieces by hungry cougars. I have a den of them right at hand, and one pull at a rope will set them free on any intruder that may come. You had better give up all thoughts of Young Wild West. Senorita Arietta."

"There are not enough cougars in these mountain to scare Young Wild West," Arietta retorted, though she did feel more uneasy when he made the threat. "There are not enough scoundrels like you to harm him, either. He will wipe you all out, once he gets face to face with you. You ought to know that, for how ready you were to quit when he faced you in front of the hotel!"

"Ah! You know me, I see."

"Yes, I know you. When I once hear a person speak I always remember the voice. Your mask amounts to nothing. I know you, and I despise you as I do a snake! You are a heartless scoundrel, and you deserve a sudden death, which you will get!"

"I am not a scoundrel, nor am I heartless. Senorita Arietta. I have never stolen a dollar in my life, and I have never committed a crime of any kind. That I am not without a heart is proved by my love for you. If I do bad now it will be because of you. Hearken to what I say! If I turn loose my cougars upon Young Wild West and his partners it will be because I love you, and want you to become my honorable wife."

"You had better think about your funeral, instead of getting married."

The brave girl was wonderfully cool, and as she peered through a hole in the blanket and watched the man's lips move at her thrusts she made up her mind that she was more than holding her own in the war of words.

"Good night!"

Juan said no more, but turning on his heel, he went over to his sleeping quarters and turned in.

That the Masked Mexicans thought they were perfectly safe from disturbance was evident, for they did not offer to keep the least bit of a watch.

And it seemed that they were safe, too, for the night wore on, and all was still without.

Hop slept along with them, for he had resigned himself to wait until morning before he did anything.

When daylight first began to show in the cave the Chinaman opened his eyes.

He had slept very well for two short hours, and he now got ready for what was to come.

"Me likee gittee up," he said, giving Pedro a nudge.

The man only gave a grunt and turned over on his side. Then he tried it on Emanuel, who refused to be aroused.

"Me no likee lis," Hop muttered, and then he sat upright.

Seeing the hilt of a knife protruding from the sheath that was attached to Pedro's belt, he became possessed of a sudden idea.

The next minute he was up and leaning over it.

His mouth opened, and his teeth came to on the knife handle.

Then he carefully drew it forth and started for the curtained corner of the cave.

Once there he whispered:

"Missy Alietta!"

"All right, Hop," came the reply in a low tone of voice. The girl was awake, as he supposed she would be.

The curtain was partly raised and Arietta looked out. She saw the Chinaman, with the knife in his mouth, and then her gaze was directed to the part where the three villains were lying asleep.

"Me wantee cuttee you allee same loosee."

She quickly turned around, so her bonds could be reached by the blade of the knife.

Hop got the edge against the rope and proceeded to saw upon it.

In less than half a minute the bonds parted, and Arietta was free.

Her hands and arms were numb from being tied so long, but she quickly threw off the feeling and seized the knife.

Two strokes from it and Hop was free.

But just then Juan awoke.

He sat bolt upright, and saw the two prisoners standing before the curtain.

"Pedro! Emanuel! Get up—quick!" he shouted, and then he leaped over to the Chinaman and Arietta.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

Young Wild West was not long in getting to the camp, ~~where he found his way to the gulch.~~

~~He found Charlie and Jim not a little worried over his absence.~~

~~They shook their heads when they saw him come in alone.~~

~~They, as well as Anna and Eloise, had expected to see him have Arietta and Hop with him when he came back.~~

~~"I am glad to get the help of some of the men."~~

ers to find Arietta," he said, shaking his head. "That the Masked Mexicans have caught both Arietta and Hop I feel sure. But it is a regular puzzle to search about above the gulch in the dark. Perhaps some of the men here will know where the different paths lead to."

Wing was thoughtful enough to fetch the boy a cup of hot coffee.

He drank it and it made him feel better.

Leaving Jim in charge of the camp, he took Charlie with him to the hotel.

There he called Meeker aside, and told him just how things stood.

The hotelkeeper was much surprised.

"What!" he exclaimed. "The Masked Mexicans has stole one of the gals? By thunder! This are too much. The boys must git out after 'em right away."

He began shouting it out, in spite of Wild's request for him to go it easy, and in a few minutes everybody in the hotel knew what had happened.

And there was not a man of them who was not ready to give all the assistance he could.

Miguel and his two friends were very earnest in their desire to catch the villains who had caused them to be placed under suspicion, and they were among the first to mount their horses and start out.

Then a search which lasted nearly the whole night began.

But by something that was really wonderful the spot where the cave of the Masked Mexicans was located was not discovered, though the men must have been very close to it several times.

Wild was not disheartened when the search was given up near morning.

He felt pretty sure that he could find the path he had seen the three men come down from at dusk the night before.

As soon as it was daylight he was in the gulch, looking for the place.

Charlie and Jim were with him, of course.

They were not very long in finding what they thought might be the right path, and then they started up it.

The sun was not yet up when they came to the cave.

A feeling of exultation came over Young Wild West, as he dropped from the back of his horse and started for the opening.

It was at that moment that Juan called out for his two companions to get up.

Wild stepped forward, without making much noise.

The next moment he saw Arietta and Hop standing in a corner of the cave, and Juan facing them with a drawn revolver.

"Here I am, Et!" cried the young deadshot, and then he leaped forward.

Whack!

He knocked the revolver from the hand of Juan, who had donned his mask before springing to his feet, and then Arietta sprang into his arms with a cry of

This was not just the thing for her to do at that moment, for it gave the other two Mexicans a chance to get at her lover.

They were coming for him with drawn revolvers, their faces covered by the masks, the same as their leader.

Wild saw that his chance of getting out the way he had come in was cut off, so he called out loudly for Charlie and Jim to come, and then, seizing hold of his sweetheart, made for the other outlet of the cave.

He got through the opening, and Arietta came after him.

Juan, enraged at seeing the girl being torn from him, followed.

"Whoopie!" rang out from the other side of the cave.

It was Cheyenne Charlie's familiar call, and becoming frightened, Emanuel and Pedro bolted out through the opening.

Juan made a desperate leap and seized hold of Arietta. Out came the other villains.

Wild was right in front of them.

He became their objective point at once.

The young deadshot bounded behind a rock.

Crack!

Pedro fired a shot in the air.

Emanuel noticed that he was entangled in the rope that was attached to the slab in front of the den of wild beasts.

"Let them out, Pedro!" he shouted.

Arietta, struggling in the arms of Juan, uttered a scream.

The scream had scarcely left the lips of Arietta when Wild appeared on the scene.

At that very instant the Masked Mexicans let the cougars out of the cave.

Crack—erack—crack!

Wild started in coolly to clean them up.

The foremost rolled over in the agonies of death, the second followed suit, and the third reared up with a bullet in its foreleg.

Crack!

The fourth and last fell dead without a quiver.

Crack!

Then the wounded one gave up the ghost, just as it was springing upon the young deadshot.

Wild had done his work quickly and well.

He now turned his attention to Arietta.

She had broken loose from Juan's clutches, and he was bounding after her with an uplifted knife.

"Caramba!" he cried fiercely. "If I cannot have you alive I will have you dead!"

Crack!

The leader of the Masked Mexicans stopped still, and then throwing up his arms, quivered for the small part of a second, and sank to the ground.

Cheyenne Charlie had settled his career by a well-directed bullet. Pedro and Emanuel promptly surrendered when Jim appeared on the scene.

The next day the masked bandits were

than that they had assisted their leader to carry off the girl.

"I reckon we'll let the people at Greaser Gulch settle on your fate," said Wild, who was once more clasping his sweetheart in his strong arms.

"Oh, Wild," cried the girl, joyously. "I knew you would kill all the cougars they could turn loose upon you. Why, I watched every shot you fired without getting frightened. When I saw you drop the first one I knew you were all right. Didn't they go down, though?"

"Yes, Et, but it took five shots to do the business," was the reply.

They soon got to the mining camp, and when it became known that the girl and Chinaman had been found, and that the Masked Mexicans were responsible for their disappearance, there were cries for lynching the two captives.

But Wild had a way about him that was effective, not to say persuasive.

"I guess we had better let them go, boys," our hero said. "The only real crime they committed was in kidnapping my sweetheart. But I have got her now, so we are satisfied."

"Give 'em twenty minutes ter start fur ther Mexican Line!" shouted Meeker, the hotel-keeper.

This was decided upon, after an argument.

The two men mounted their horses, ready to be given the word.

Then Pedro called our hero and whispered:

"There is gold in the cave. It was found there by us. Take it, Young Wild West! It is yours, to pay you for sparing our lives."

Away went the two Mexicans as though their lives depended upon it.

That was the last ever seen of them in Greaser Gulch.

Young Wild West remained there two or three days after that, and seeing that Miguel and his two men were getting hold of the best claims, they decided to leave.

When they went away they took with them the gold that had been hidden in the cave by some person unknown to anyone.

The visit to Greaser Gulch had panned out pretty good, after all, even if Arietta did have an exciting time of it with the Masked Mexicans.

THE END.

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